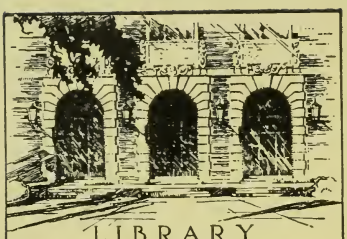

GOOD FOR NOTHING;

OR,

ALL DOWN HILL.

BY

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AUTHOR OF 'DIGBY GRAND,' THE 'INTERPRETER,'
'HOLMBY HOUSE,' ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

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OF

THE SECOND VOLUME.

GOOD FOR NOTHING;

OR,

ALL DOWN HILL.

PART II.

I fruitless mourn to him that cannot hear,
And weep the more because I weep in vain.

CHAPTER XXVI.

OVER THE WAY.

A DAZZLING sky, a clear warm atmosphere tempered by a breeze, grassy plains alive with quails and paroquets, and rich in knee-deep verdure, undulating slopes crowned by waving woods a-glow in the mellow sunlight, and far away, beyond and above all, a strip of deep blue sea. Such is the scene I would fain call up, a scene of Australian splendour, of sylvan beauty, of wild adventurous associations, and yet, with its distant glimpses

of ocean, a scene reminding those who looked upon it of their home.

When the Dutch boër, toiling with his lumbering vehicle and his span of weary oxen towards Capetown, comes at last in sight of the sparkling African sea, he lights a fresh pipe with fresh satisfaction, and pointing exultingly towards that distant gleam, exclaims, 'Behold the Englishman's wagon-path!' and the Dutch boër, albeit a person of sluggish apprehension, and no very brilliant imaginative powers, is in this instance right. Whoever has been much in a foreign land, and has felt, as the absent are prone to feel, a weary longing for home, must remember the welcome with which he instinctively greeted the friend that, if ever he got there at all, was to bear him to his own shores, must remember how the sight of the sea alone was like the sound of a national strain, how to be under the union jack was the next thing to seeing the white cliffs once more.

Stretching away at the best pace a wiry little Australian horse, held hard by the head, can command, rides an Englishman in the normal state of hurry peculiar to his countrymen in every land but their own. He has time, nevertheless, to feel his heart thrill as he catches a glimpse of that distant sea, but he is also too thorough a Briton to allow any consideration on earth to divert his attention from his present occupation, no less engrossing a business than the chase.

Many months have elapsed since I left Gilbert Orme at the gate of Kensington Gardens, in far worse plight, to his own thinking, than was ever his father Adam, for the latter, though driven from their Eden, took his

Eve along with him. Many a month of adventure and excitement has passed over his head. The outward man has grown brown, robust, and prosperous-looking. A deep abiding happiness stamps its presence on the features as unerringly as does the endurance of a continuous affliction, but the glowing effects of the former are as becoming as those of the latter are the reverse. There are no haggard, anxious lines about Gilbert's eyes and mouth now, while his smile, always so sweet, has gained a frank joyousness which it did not display in London. A silken and abundant beard adds to the manliness of his appearance, and hides his chin, which is the worst feature of his face. In that rough shooting dress, with a gaudy handkerchief flying loose about his throat, I question if Lady Olivia would recognise her son; yet is he all unaltered in mind, and even now, speeding along after those gaunt kangaroo dogs, the presence of Ada seems to pervade the whole atmosphere of beauty and fragrance around him. Ada is in the rustling breeze—the glowing woods—the sunny upland slopes—the smiling sky, above all, the distant strip of deep blue sea.

It is rare galloping ground, though somewhat hard for legs and feet of less enduring materials than the Australian horse possesses, and 'the pace,' as Gilbert would have called it in Leicestershire a twelvemonth ago, is sufficiently good to satisfy even that reckless and exacting horseman. A leaping, brown object about two hundred yards ahead of him, is bounding rapidly away down hill, disposing of all intervening obstacles, such as underwood, fallen timber, broken ground, and dry watercourses, with extraordinary facility; but those

two large rough, lean dogs, are gaining on it nevertheless at every stride, and Gilbert's eager little horse is pulling hard at his rider, and spinning after them as if he, too, would fain have a share in the spoils. Here and there a huge tree lying prostrate and half-concealed by the luxuriant verdure, offers no mean obstacle to encounter at a flying leap, but the little bay horse gathers himself with the quickness of a cat for the effort, and landing like a deer, is in his stride and away again without loss of time, and with ever-increasing energy. The rider who urged 'Mouse' so resolutely to his downfall twenty years ago, has gained strength and experience now. Wherever a horse can go, be it across the stretching pastures, and over the formidable ox-fences of Leicestershire; be it through the dense underwood and athwart the 'apple-tree flats' of Australia, Gilbert Orme is the man to ride him; not only to sit on his back and allow himself to be carried like a sack of potatoes or a hundredweight of coals, but to *ride* him and make the most of him every yard he goes. He is close to the kangaroo dogs, cheering them on their game even now.

'*Yooi*, over, Gilbert! that's a *rum* one!' cries a cheery voice behind him, as the little bay horse clears a fallen trunk as high as a fair-sized gate. 'Forward! forward!' adds the speaker, pointing ahead to a flat verdant glade up which the dogs are stretching at a killing pace, nearing their now flagging game; and John Gordon, gaining a few yards on his friend by a judicious turn, comes up alongside.

'Five minutes more and we shall run into him,' he shouts, sitting well back on his horse and urging him

to his extreme pace; 'when he "blobs" like that he's getting beat. See how Canvass sticks to him, and the yellow dog hangs back waiting for the turn.'

While he speaks, a subdued sparkle in John's black eye shows that he, too, is not insensible to the excitement of the sport.

There are some men on whose exterior change of climate, life, or habits, seems to make no impression; whose persons, like their minds, are superior to extraneous circumstances, and of this class is John Gordon. Clean shaved is he, here in the wild Australian bush, as he used to be in the Fleet-street counting-house; and although he has discarded the black hat and coat of civilized life, or rather I should perhaps say those articles of dress have discarded their wearer, his habiliments have none of the picturesque variety in colour and fashion which distinguishes those of his friend. His clear olive tint is perhaps a thought clearer and deeper under this burning sun that has tanned his comrade so rich a brown, but the crisp black locks sit as close to the head as if they had but just emerged from the Burlington Arcade, and his well-cut jaw is rather defined than concealed by the short curling whiskers. John has been working hard in Sydney for months, astonishing, sometimes disgusting the old stagers, by the quick apprehension he shows for affairs of trade, and making himself thoroughly master of details in a few weeks, with which it took them as many years to become familiar. Newman and Hope look upon him as a prodigy in the mercantile world. That firm has not been accustomed to see the keenest talents for business combined with a soldier-like rapidity

of thought and action, and the manners of an accomplished gentleman. Also, they have more than once tried to contest some of John's arrangements, and found themselves, without knowing why, worsted in the attempt. Altogether, Mr. Gordon has rather astonished the good people at Sydney than otherwise.

It was with considerably more energy than his wont, that he greeted Gilbert's arrival at the Antipodes. I need not now observe that John was by no means a demonstrative gentleman, yet could he be sufficiently cordial on occasion, and even *his* self-command could not conceal his delight at Orme's unexpected appearance with the latest intelligence from the Square. Since then they have been constant associates; the man of business sharing his hours of relaxation with the man of pleasure, the latter by all means in his power, and with considerable assistance from his friend, studying to acquaint himself with the resources of the colony, preparatory to that public life on which he has determined to enter because Ada wishes it.

In the meantime, both are enjoying a fortnight's expedition into the Bush; and after a long day's 'draw,' they have had an undeniable gallop with a kangaroo.

Three minutes more of thrilling excitement, a scramble through a dried-up water-course—a 'crowner' for John, whose horse goes shoulder deep into a hole—a shrill English 'Who-whoop!' and our sportsmen are standing by their reeking steeds, whilst Gordon, as the more experienced of the two, draws a glistening hunting-knife, and filling a short black pipe with 'Cavendish,' proceeds to take upon himself the obsequies of the prey. Gilbert pulls out his watch—

'Eighteen minutes,' says he, 'from find to finish, and best pace every yard of the way!'

The horses, with drooping heads and heaving, indrawn flanks, attest the severity of the gallop. John meanwhile, with upturned sleeves, is demonstrating his thorough knowledge of woodcraft, in one of its departments on which it is unnecessary to dwell. He looks up from his work—

'Equal to the Quorn,' says he, 'for pace and distance.'

'With almost as much jumping,' remarks his friend, patting the bay horse's dripping neck, and thinking what a rare cover-hack that game little animal would make him in England.

'And the advantage of six feet of venison at the finish,' adds the carver, wiping his blade on the grass; 'we must have had short commons to-day if it hadn't been for this fellow. I rather think I shall astonish you when we camp, and I show you what "steamer" is!'

Indeed, they were rather short of provisions. In anticipation of a separation from their servants, they had with them a few ounces of tea, some tobacco, and a ration or two of pork and flour; but a haunch of kangaroo venison was likely to prove no mean addition to this humble fare, as John emphatically observed the while he packed it behind his saddle, ere they remounted their jaded horses to look for water in the vicinity of which they might camp.

The sun was going down as they reached one of those fluctuating rivers, called in Australia *creeks*, which, full of water and rushing in one mighty torrent towards the

sea to-day, are perhaps to-morrow dried up into a succession of isolated pools fast waning into hopeless aridity. Once there, they unsaddled rapidly, turned their horses to graze, having first hobbled them, a somewhat unnecessary precaution, until they should have recovered their fatigues; and then proceeded with infinite labour to collect enough fallen branches to make a tolerable fire.

They had only their hunting-knives for this purpose, and for cooking utensils possessed nothing but a certain iron pot, from which John never parted, and which indeed, with its close-fitting lid, formed the receptacle of all their luxuries, and a tin mug that hung at Gilbert's belt.

With such insufficient accessories, our two gentlemen from St. James's-street were now quite old enough campaigners to furnish an excellent meal.

It was well they were so, for their 'coo-ey' call—so termed from the distance at which a shrill enunciation of those syllables can be heard—was never answered; and, indeed, their spare horses and servants must have been some thirty miles or more distant from them in a direct line through the bush.

At length their preparations were made. The fire burned up, the pot was on to boil, the flour, kneaded into a heavy dough, was placed to bake in the ashes, until the tough mass should have acquired the consistency that entitled it to its appropriate name of damper. Gilbert's mug was made a tea-pot for the occasion; and the two friends, thoroughly wearied, lit their short black pipes, and reclined against their saddles, watching with considerable satisfaction the cooking of a savoury mess

which was to constitute their meal. The horses were grazing assiduously in their vicinity, and the stars coming out one by one.

'Nothing like steamer,' observed John, knocking the ashes from his pipe, and removing the lid of the pot to give its contents a good stir with his hunting-knife, the same weapon which had inflicted its *coup de grace* on the kangaroo.

'Not to be despised,' answered his friend, shovelling a liberal portion on a piece of bark that served him for a platter. 'I never could eat a "haggis" in Scotland, but when it is made of kangaroo and salt pork, it is food for the gods. A little bit more liver, John, and a pinch of powder. As usual we have forgotten the salt! Give us a drain of tea if it's drawn. As Holyhead says after a magnum, a child might play with me now!'

So they ate and drank as men can only eat and drink who are all day taking severe exercise in the open air, and who sleep with no lower roof over their heads than the starry heaven; and then, with the smoking mug of tea set equitably between them, and the pipes alight once more, they settled down to a quiet chat about 'home.'

'We will go back together, Gilbert,' said John, in his short, decided tones. 'A few weeks more will teach you all you are likely to learn about the colony, unless you came and settled here for good. I don't think it would suit you as well as West-Acres. My business will soon be wound up with Newman and Hope, then we'll hoist 'Blue Peter' at the fore, up anchor, westward ho! and away!'

'I am very glad I came,' said Gilbert, dreamily, between the puffs of his pipe.

'So am I,' rejoined the other; 'it has done you a world of good, depend upon it. For myself, I don't object to the colony; and if I hadn't been here, I fear we should have saved but little out of the fire. *Aide-toi, et Dieu t'aidera.* We've had a "facer," though, and I am *very* glad I came, too!'

'Is it a complete smash?' asked Gilbert, rousing from his abstraction. 'The poor Alderman! how will he bear it?'

'He has enough left not to starve,' replied the junior partner, 'and that is more than can be said for some. I do not pity a man much who has been always in business. The Alderman has had a good time enough, and a long day. This could not have been avoided, and was one of the chances that must be run with large returns. I'm sorry for Bella.'

'And yourself?' put in his friend.

'I've lost ten years of my life, according to my calculation,' replied John. 'It's against me, but what then? You've seen a fellow climbing a pole at a fair, Gilbert! he swarms up to the six feet of grease at the top, gains an inch at a time, stops, gives way, and slides down by the run. What is the next move? To stand by and whine, giving up the leg of mutton altogether? Not a bit of it! He puts fresh sand in his hands, and at it again! *Mox reficit rates*, you know; and with Dame Fortune as with her sex, "one refusal no rebuff."'

He spoke quite calmly and confidently, also with something of contemptuous indifference which was rather

provoking; and yet this loss of capital, as he truly observed, was to John the loss of ten years of life, perhaps of all that was best worth living for. The fruit for which he thirsted would not surely hang for ever up there on the bough! Over-ripe, might it not fall to the ground? or might not another with longer reach come and pluck it whilst he was making his ladder? And now, half a dozen rounds were broken at once, and he must go to the bottom and begin again. Well, no good ever came yet of complaining! He would set about mending them in silence. But what if the ladder should not be finished till too late? John suffered and bled inwardly, so to speak, and could not always shut out the whispers of the fiend who vexed his ear, and who is so fond of asking, *Cui bono?*

'Let me help you,' said Gilbert, earnestly. 'I am well off, I have plenty of money. At least I can *borrow* as much as we want. You and I are old friends, John; don't be proud! Besides, you know, I would do anything for the good Alderman.'

John smoked on in silence, his keen eye resting on his friend. It was quite dark now, save for the fire over which they sat. John's face was habitually impassible as marble. It must have been the flickering of that wood fire which cast such successive shades over its surface.

It was a full minute before he spoke.

'You were always a good fellow, Gilbert,' said he, 'but you are an altered man of late. Forgive me for speaking so freely. I would rather be under an obligation to you *now* than ever, if I felt I understood you, but I don't. Never mind. You're improved: that's

all right. And as for help, I dare say I should come to you fast enough if I wanted it.'

For all his honesty this was hardly a straightforward speech of Mr. Gordon's. If he wished to find out anything, why did he not ask point-blank, as was his custom? Was he, too, one of those who must needs 'beat about the bush?' Was there a sacred grove in any forest on earth round which he hovered and hankered, not daring to enter in? Gilbert leaned his head back against his saddle, looking upward into the starry night. He was indeed an altered man for the nonce, and a happy one. Also he felt an intense longing to proclaim his happiness, to pour out some of the new fancies which kept thronging his mind. He was so far from her, too: it would be an immense delight to talk about her. He had indeed mentioned her name once or twice in a studiously careless manner, and had been disappointed to find that his part was so well acted as to raise not the slightest suspicion in his comrade's breast, who took no more notice of the magic syllables than if they had spelt the patronymic of his wet-nurse. He had a great mind to unbosom himself then and there, but he remembered Ada's wish that all confidences should be avoided; so he adopted a middle course, and propounded one of those dreamy sentimental questions it is so impossible to answer.

'What do you suppose they *are*, John?' said he, pointing upwards with the stem of the short black pipe; 'worlds or what? And do you think that people who like each other here will be together hereafter up there?'

It was so unlike a speech of Gilbert's that John stared at his recumbent friend in utter consternation. Once

more the fire flickered up and threw a shade as before across his dark face. A dingoe, too, or native wild dog, attracted by the smell of the 'steamer,' had prowled to within a few yards of their bivouac. His shining green eyes were alone visible. John took a blazing log from the fire, and a shower of sparks flying about just behind where the green eyes *had* been, attested the accuracy of his aim. Then he sat down again, and spoke in scornful tones.

'What would they do with each other up there, if they *did* meet? There are no politics, or field-sports, or money-making for the men, no smart dresses and shopping and scandal for the women. They would all of them find the star very *slow*, depend upon it. Do you believe in Platonics, Gilbert? Do you think *one* fair spirit for your minister would be enough after a liberal honeymoon, say of a couple of hundred years? Don't you think she would call in other spirits worse than herself to see how they were dressed; and you would be very glad to welcome anything that should break the *tête-à-tête?* What has come to you, man?'

'This has come to me,' answered Gilbert, rousing up with unusual energy, 'that I've wasted the best part of my life, and only found it out of late—that I am happier far than I used to be, because I *know* now that a man is not put into this world only to amuse himself —that his duty is to make the happiness of others—to take his share in the great scheme, and enjoy the wages he earns with the sweat of his brow—to work in the fields all day with his fellows, and rest in his own garden at sunset,—that's my lesson, John; I thank God I've learnt it, and I bless the person who taught it me.'

I think my boy was very *nearly* right. It is not well, saith the philosopher, to examine too closely into motives, yet what was it *but* the motive that in his case made all the difference between lost and found?

John Gordon would have liked much to inquire the name of the teacher who had been taking such pains with his friend, but his lips were set so firmly together that the question never escaped them; and it was in bitterer tones than usual that he resumed the conversation.

'Then you mean to sell the horses, and abjure the vanities of life; turn country gentleman, grow turnips, and mind the poor and the poachers. Quite right, old fellow; and you deserve credit for it. You are not *obliged* to do anything but mischief in right of your station. Well, it's no credit to me to work, because it's my trade. So you will have it all. Honour and happiness, and a good conscience, and a balance at your banker's. I wish you joy—it's a strong position. Votes and interest—flocks and herds, aye,' he added, inaudibly, between his set teeth, 'and the poor man's ewe-lamb into the bargain!'

Now this was very unjust of John Gordon, if, as I shrewdly suspect, his departure from his customary reticence was owing to a misgiving that a certain young lady at home had been putting her cousin through a course of elementary instruction in ethics. Nor, indeed, was his metaphor peculiarly apt, inasmuch as the most pastoral of her admirers would scarcely have designated Lady Gertrude a 'lamb' of any description.

'There are better things than flocks and herds,' quoth Gilbert, apparently following out the thread of

his own reflection; 'ay, than votes and interest, silver and gold, houses and land. I don't mean learning, I don't mean fame. I can fancy circumstances under which I should be thankful and happy to work all day long with a spade for my daily bread. I can fancy two rooms and a pigsty looking brighter than Ormolu-house. Hang it! old fellow, I know I can depend upon you. I've a great mind to tell you something.'

John Gordon would have known it all in two more minutes; the cup of his friend's happiness was running over, and the drops, be sure, would have neutralized all the bitterness of his own. But as he turned his face from the firelight to hearken, an exclamation of surprise rose to Gilbert's lips. He jumped to his feet and bade his comrade listen.

'It's a horse's tramp, I'll swear,' said he, *arrectis auribus;* 'and mounted, too, by the regular pace. How the fellow rides! He'll be into our camp neck-and-heels if we don't holloa. Give him a "cooey," John! You do it better than I can.'

In effect John's shrill call was answered by a similar sound close at hand; and a wavering mass made its appearance, looming very large and indistinct in the darkness, while a hoarse, cheerful voice shouted out—

'Hold on, like good fellows! Don't shoot! there are no bushrangers here-away; and you're Englishmen, I can tell, by the camping of ye!'

His horse gave a sob of contentment, as half the mass dismounted, heavily and wearily, like a man who has had about enough. The next instant brought him out in full relief as he stepped into the red glare of the firelight.

CHAPTER XXVII.

'AN UNBIDDEN GUEST.'

THERE is small ceremony in the Bush. The new-comer accepted a proffered mug containing about a quart of smoking tea, and took a hearty pull at its contents. John Gordon pushed him down into his own seat by the fire, and put the remains of the 'steamer' on to warm up again; whilst Gilbert unsaddled the tired horse, led him to water, and then turned him loose to graze. There are different codes of politeness in different situations, but a welcome everywhere seems to consist in offering a guest meat and drink. It does not take long for a man to settle himself who has ridden a tired horse from sunrise to sunset. A pocket-comb is soon run through the hair and beard; and by the time the new arrival had emptied mug and platter, and filled a short pipe from his own seal-skin pouch, he seemed to feel very sufficiently at home.

Fresh logs were thrown on the fire, which blazed up gloriously, throwing a thousand fantastic shadows on the surrounding trees, and shedding a glare on one of the horses wandering ghost-like about the camp of his masters. The night was very soft and calm, the stars shining with a *golden* lustre peculiar to the southern

hemisphere, and a light air ever and anon rustling the dense foliage, as if the leaves stirred in their sleep and hushed off again quieter than before. Occasionally the stamp and snort of a horse or the champing of his jaws as he cropped the moistened herbage, broke the surrounding stillness; but even such casual interruptions seemed only to enhance the prevailing silence of the night. For a while the three men smoked on without speaking. Two of them were loth to disturb the soothing influence of the hour; the third was in all the physical enjoyment of rest, repletion, and tobacco. At length he puffed forth a volume of smoke with a sigh of extreme satisfaction, and turned towards his entertainers.

'Gentlemen both!' said he, putting the mug of tea to his lips and feigning to drink their healths, 'a good job for me that I came across ye. It's no joke, even in these fine nights, camping out in the dark, without a morsel of prog or a drop to drink, and the 'baccy nearly done besides. It's the right stuff too, is that in the seal-skin; try it. What is life but a vapour? and is not 'baccy the staff thereof?'

There was no disputing such self-evident propositions; and as their guest seemed a free and easy, communicative sort of gentleman, it was natural to inquire of him whether he had come a long distance since sunrise.

'No dead reckoning here,' was his reply: 'if you asked my horse he would say yes, for before the sun went down he could hardly wag. Yet he was a thundering good bit of stuff this morning, and now I guess he's as crisp as a biscuit. Well, strangers! it's a long lane that has no turning, but I did think for five

minutes afore I saw your fire that it was about U.P.; and I haven't been reared altogether on white-meat and milk diet neither. Some of the lily-handed ones would say I was a roughish customer. What's your opinion, gentlemen?—there's no charge for looking.'

He *was* 'a roughish customer' in appearance, no doubt; and yet the man had something of the tone and manner of one who had lived in good society. Nothing could be less sumptuous than his apparel: a red flannel shirt, becoming crimson in hue; a grey frieze jacket, patched and darned; leather trousers that, like the chameleon, had taken the colour of every object with which they came in contact, and boots of undressed hide, afforded what might well be termed an unvarnished exterior. Nor did a skin tanned to a rich mahogany and a magnificent brown beard detract from his wild appearance. His whiskers also were of remarkable length, and curled in stiff corkscrew ringlets down to his shoulders. Gilbert fancied he had seen that face before, yet where in civilized life was it possible that he could have met this strange apparition of the bush?

Nothing abashed by the scrutiny he had invited, the stranger proceeded—

'I'm on my way to Sydney, I am. That's where I'm bound. Where do I hail from?—that's tellings. Well, you're good chaps both of you, I can see, and born gentlemen, I'll lay a guinea, though you *are* two-handed, but a man soon learns to be two-handed in the bush. Ay, I know the sort, though I haven't seen a true-bred one for a month of Sundays. It's not so long that I've quite forgotten it, since I'd boot-

trees of my own, and wore a "go-to-meeting" hat and kid gloves on week-days. I shouldn't lose my way to-morrow if you set me down on the heath at the "Turn-of-the-Lands" in a fog. You look surprised; but bless ye, things happen every day to take the skin off a man's eyes. Now, where d'ye think this 'baccy-bag came from?'

He looked humorously from one to the other as each professed his inability to answer the question.

'You've heard of the diggins where the gold grows. Well, it's been "rock the cradle, Lucy," with me before this; and though there *may* be queerer places than the diggins on earth, it's not been my luck to meet with them as yet. I'd a mate there—a thin chap with a cough. Poor beggar! how that cough of his kept me awake o' nights; and somehow, though he was no great things to work, I liked the chap too. He took an *extraordinary* fancy to me, and you'll say that's strange, but the reason's stranger still. 'Twas all along of my wearing a bit of a gimcrack thing that I didn't seem to care about parting with, and his mother had one like it, so he said, at home. People have queer fancies, d'ye see, up there. Well, we went share and share alike, and whether we made an ounce or a hundredweight that's neither here nor there. But the work he did, light as it was, seemed too much for him; and one day he says to me, "Bill," says he (you may call me "Bill," gentlemen, and I shall esteem it a compliment)—"I'm about washed out," says he; "what'll you do for me when I'm gone?"—"Gone be hanged!" says I; "where are you going to?" He was a fanciful lad, and he

pointed up into the sky—blazing hot it looked, I thought—and, says he, "Up there, I hope, Bill! When my time comes you put me quietly in the ground, and say a prayer over me, there's a good fellow! I wouldn't like to be buried like a dog!" So of course I promised him, and that day I thought he was stronger and worked better than common. I liked the lad, I tell ye, so I did; but it's no use talking about that now.

'Well, gentlemen, there are robberies, as far as I can make out, all over the world. I've seen men robbed in Paris and London, and at Epsom and Newmarket, as well as Ballarat. It don't make much odds whether a fellow empties your pockets with his legs under the same table or his hand on your throat; not but what we'd the cream of society too for the skimming. Next lot to me was a Baronet—not a very spicy one, but a Baronet all the same—and his mate was an Honourable, and a precious bad one he was! There was a lawyer working fourteen hours a day beyond them, and a Methodist parson, who got *delirium tremens* and so went under. Men of all sorts meet at the diggins; and though the article's scarce enough in most places, I didn't think you could have gone through so many trades and professions without running against an honest man. My mate was the best of them, poor fellow! and even he took a cullender once that didn't belong to him; to be sure he returned it when he'd done with it, for he had a conscience, you know, and was a scholar, and a poet too, and such-like. I've seen the tears in a strong

chap's eyes to hear him quavering away with his weak voice how

> They fitted a grey marble slab to a tomb,
> And fair Alice lies under the stone.

It's a neat thing enough, gentlemen; I'll sing it to you to-morrow.

'We'd a little gold-dust in a bag—it makes no odds how much, but it took us a goodish time to get; and digging isn't such roaring fun that you'd go out of your way to take a longer spell than you can help. So we put it away in a hole, and I slept above it with a revolver pretty handy. My mate knew I could make very fair practice at that game, if necessary.

'Well, the same night after he'd been talking to me so chicken-hearted, I woke with a start to hear a scuffling noise in the tent and my own name in a smothered voice, like a man's half-strangled.

'I jumped on my legs pretty smart, I can tell you; and dark as it was, I soon caught hold. There were two or three of them inside who'd come without an invitation, and one made a bolt of it in less than no time. He was no bad judge neither, for I was more than half riled, and less than that makes me feel ugly at close grips. As he dashed out he tore the tent open, and the moonlight streaming in, I saw the muzzle of a pistol point-blank for *this* child's head, and a glittering eye squinting over it that looked like making sure. Just then my mate broke from the beggar who held him, and sprang up between us to take the ball in his brisket that was meant for me.

The tent was full of smoke and the poor chap fell stone dead at my feet.'

The narrator's voice failed him a little at this stage of his recital, and he complained that the smoke from the fire got in his eyes.

'What next?' he resumed, in answer to a question from Gilbert, who betrayed a flattering interest in the story; 'I passed my hand behind the villain's arms and pinioned him as neat as wax. He cried for mercy then, the white-livered slave, when he heard the click of my revolver turning round to the cock! I looked in his eyes and saw by the glare of them that he judged me wolfish, and I guess he wasn't far out. The kitchen was clear by that time; there was only us two, and my mate's dead body in the tent. There was but *one* left to walk out and cool himself five minutes afterwards, for I shot the beggar through the heart at short notice; and all the plunder he had on him, as I'm a living man and a thirsty one, was this little seal-skin pouch, filled with the best tobacco I ever smoked yet. I judged he'd robbed a poor Spaniard who was found with his throat cut some days before. Howsoever, it's lucky it was in his right breast-pocket, or my ball would have spoiled the bag. There's a screw or so left, gentlemen; fill your pipes again.'

'And your mate?' said the two listeners in a breath.

'I buried him next morning when the sun rose,' answered the stranger, 'and I said a prayer over him too, as I promised. It couldn't do him any harm, and I sometimes think I was none the worse for it myself for a day or two. I worked on my own hook after

that, and I rather think I paid my expenses; but you've maybe discovered, gentlemen, that gold isn't just as sticky as treacle, and all the money-bags I've seen yet have a small hole at the mouth and a large one at the far end. I kept an hotel at Melbourne once; that's the best business I ever had—breakfasts thirteen shillings a head, and champagne a guinea a pint. I could drive my four horses and play cards every evening, fifty pounds a cut. But somehow they burnt the place to the ground one night with their games, and I walked out in a pair of trousers and an old silk handkerchief, glad enough to have saved my skin. Then I opened a spirit-store, and was undersold by one of my own waiters. That was a bad job, for I had to leave in debt, but my best customer he wanted a man to look after a sheep-run, and he took me for lack of a better. I could have put by some money too, but the life's enough to kill a fellow who hasn't been regularly broke for a hermit, and I cut it before I'd been with him six weeks. I've done a few odd jobs since then, and travelled over most of the colony, either for business or pleasure. For my part, I think one place is very like another. In the meantime I wish you good-night, gentlemen. You've given me plenty to eat and drink, many thanks to you, and for smoking and sleeping I can shift for myself.'

In two minutes more he was fast asleep; and his entertainers, nothing loth to follow so good an example, threw a fresh log on the fire, and betook themselves without farther ceremony to their repose.

Gilbert remained awake after the other two had begun to snore. Happiness is no heavy sleeper, and it

was a luxury which of late he never missed, to lie for a while with half-shut eyes, and suffer his fancy to wander into that golden future, which every day that passed seemed to bring more near. He was so happy; he felt so kindly disposed towards his fellow-creatures. This adventurer, sleeping heavily by his side, seemed, notwithstanding his eccentricities, to be an honest, well-meaning fellow enough. He would find out more about him to-morrow; he would befriend him, and perhaps help him to a chance of something better than the wild reckless life he had lately led. It was so delightful to do good *for Ada's sake*. To refer all his feelings and actions to the imaginary standard by which he thought *she* would judge them.

There is a story in one of the old romaunts of an unknown champion who never raised his vizor lest man or woman should look upon his face; but who rode the country like a true Paladin, rescuing the oppressed from the oppressor, winning armour, and gems, and countless riches with his sword, and bestowing great *largesses* on all who were in need, the bad and good alike. Yet never a guerdon asked he for blood or treasure save one. On the vanquished knight at his feet, the rescued damsel at his bridle hand, the beggar by the wayside, the barefooted hermit, and the mitred abbot, he imposed the same conditions—*Priez pour elle*. With those three words he claimed his wages, and day by day the prayers from warm, thankful hearts went up to heaven for Her. Thus she prospered, and was happy, and forgot him.

So at last he won a king's battle, fighting, as was his wont, in the van. But a lance head broke deep in

that honest breast, and a shrewd sword-stroke clove the trusty head-piece in twain, and for the first time in harness or in hall, men looked on the pale, worn face of the unknown knight. So they turned his rein out of the press, and brought him to the king. Then did that monarch swear on his sword-hilt that he would reward him by whatsoever he should ask, were it the hand of his only daughter or the jewels out of his very crown, but the knight's white lips smiled feebly, for the blood was welling up through his armour, and draining his life faster and faster away. His voice was very low and thick, yet did men hear him plainly; *Priez pour elle*, said he, and so fell dead. Then a bonnie bird flew to the bower of a lightsome ladye, and beat with its wings against the casement, till she put forth her snowy arm and it perched upon her wrist. Said the lightsome ladye—'Bonnie bird, bonnie bird, comest thou from my love?' And the bonnie bird answered—'From which of thy false loves? from him in scarlet and ermine? or from him in rochet and stole? from the Prince of the Isles with his golden crest, or the pretty page with his lute on his knee?' But she said—'From none of these. Comest thou from my true love in the plain steel harness, with his lance in the rest, and his vizor ever down?' Then said the bonnie bird—'Thy true love sleeps in his plain steel harness, and his vizor is up at last, and men have looked upon his face.' But the lightsome ladye's cheek turned white as her snowy arm, for she knew then that he was dead, and she said—'*Qui me gagne, me perd; qui m'a perdu m'a gagné.*'

So the false loves mourned awhile for the sake of the lightsome ladye, because she smiled on them no longer;

and after a year and a day, the shadow of the bonnie bird flitted across a new-made grave, and when it perched at the casement, behold, the lightsome ladye was in her bower no more. Then it was well for her that the prayers of the good and bad, and the poor and sorrowing, and the hungry and thirsty, had interceded for her soul.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A PRIOR CLAIM.

'MORE sore backs,' observed John Gordon in a tone of condensed provocation, as, being the earliest riser of the three, he returned to the fire, and put the pot on for breakfast, after a matutinal visit to the horses. Already he had caught and tethered them; and on examination of those ridden by his friend and the stranger, had discovered that their hides were severely galled under the saddle, and that neither of them would probably carry a man's weight without considerable suffering for many days. This is a casualty none the less irritating that it is the common lot of all equestrians. This it is that destroys the efficiency of a cavalry soldier, and reduces the traveller to the ignominious necessity of walking with his bridle over his arm. Alas, that there is no remedy for it but rest!

Gilbert and the stranger still slept soundly and peacefully side by side, dreaming, it might be, each of them, of the fresh English glades, and the cool English breeze; of rich waving meadow or smiling upland farm; perhaps of a fair English face, that itself made the fatherland emphatically *a home*. John soon roused them; 'Bill'—as he requested his entertainers to call

him—proving himself no mean adept in the art of roughing it, and improvising with ingenious skill a multitude of little comforts astonishing to his less experienced comrades. As he became more familiar with them, too, he seemed gradually to recover the manners of a man who had lived in good society. His tone lost much of its coarseness, his expressions many of those quaint Yankeeisms which have become the colloquial slang of adventurers in every part of the world. Without quite coming up to the standard of a gentleman in the somewhat fastidious opinions of Orme and Gordon, he had evidently the trick and turn of speech habitual to certain circles, and which, once attained, is never lost again. Altogether, 'Bill' puzzled both of his entertainers considerably.

After breakfast—consisting of a *réchauffé* of the 'steamer,' and the tin mug filled with weak tea—a council of war was established, and future measures taken into consideration. Two of the party must walk, there could be no question on that point, and as John's horse was the only available animal, it was settled that he should ride up the creek to a certain bay from which he knew his way to the spot where their people had camped, while Gilbert and the stranger should remain where they were, till fresh horses could be sent for them, when they would all proceed together towards Sydney, that being the ultimate destination of the whole party.

So the two new acquaintances watched John's retreating form as he rode away through the Bush, and prepared to spend the long summer's day in the society of each other, and the care of their enfeebled horses.

Being Englishmen, the latter topic afforded them an

inexhaustible fund of conversation, and the points of 'Bill's' mount, an animal possessing extraordinary powers of speed and endurance, were canvassed at considerable length.

'He is a right good one,' said his master, eyeing with no small disgust the running wound in the poor beast's back. 'And yesterday was the fifth day he must have carried me from seventy to eighty miles. I've been far up the country to look at a sheep farm, and now I'm on my way back to Sydney about paying for it. It's a queer life, this, for a man who once had a decent house over his head, and drove his own cab every day into London; ay, and could give a friend as good a dinner as a duke. It's been a queer time, mine, from first to last—mostly in a gale of wind; always a heavy sea; not the steadiest fellow alive at the helm; and a strong tendency to carry too much sail in all weathers. I should have been a different man but for three things. I never could resist *making* money, I never could resist *staking* money, and I never could resist *spending* money. I sometimes wonder whether I shall drop my anchor in smooth water at last. I sometimes think I should like to have done with these ups and downs; to make one more good hit that would make me straight again; and so go home to my wife, lead a new life, and toddle peaceably on towards my grave.'

'What, you are married then?' asked Gilbert, with increasing interest in his companion.

'That am I,' was the reply; 'and to as nice a woman, and as pretty a woman, and as good a woman, as you'll see in a summer's day. It's been a strange

story, mine, from first to last. We've nothing to do but smoke and yarn the whole of this blessed day; if you'll light your pipe and sit down, I'll tell it you.'

Gilbert acceded willingly; throwing himself at length on the dry ground in the shade, he lit up the indispensable pipe, and listened attentively.

'I began too fast,' said the narrator; 'I've gone on too fast; I expect I shall finish too fast. If it's at all down hill the pace will be something quite out of the common. I've had friends, plenty of them; fine jovial fellows, who would back me for all they were worth, *so long as I was in luck;* and I never found one of them yet that I could depend upon when the wheel turned. There was a time in my life, to be sure I was very young, when I thought a sworn brother would have seen me through anything. I have learned better since then; but I don't think I owe those any thanks who taught me the lesson. Well, as I was telling you, they turned me loose in Paris at sixteen, with plenty of money in my pockets, and not so very green for my age. Before I was twenty, I found out one or two things that are better not learned quite so soon. I found out that there's only one person a man of sense ever considers, and that the more you make men and women subservient to your own interests, the better they treat you, especially the women. I found out you should never go in for a stake without resolving to stand for no repairs, but to win, whatever it costs; and above all I found out that if once a woman gets your head under water, she ducks you till you're drowned. I'm not such a fool as I look, and one lesson was all I

needed to teach me that. Ah! Mademoiselle Aimée! I don't think it was *I* who had the worst of it when all was done.'

There was something repulsive in his jarring laugh, as he gave vent to this vindictive reflection; something grating to his listener's feelings. The latter was one of those men whom a woman might have ruined, body and soul, and he would never have visited it on *her*.

'Well, sir, when I came to England I led a pleasant life enough. I had plenty of floating capital, and I knew how to make the most of it. I wasn't one of your fine gentlemen who can ruffle it bravely so long as the wind's fair and the tide helping them on. I could make the most of a good thing and the best of a bad one. So before I had spent the whole of my first fortune I had taken out three times its value in amusement and dissipation. I liked the life. Hang it, sir! I should like the life over again. It wasn't bad fun to go to Epsom and Ascot, Newmarket and Goodwood, with champagne and sunshine, pretty bonnets and kind looks, and a good guess at the colours that would be first past the judge's chair. There's nothing like it in *this* cursed country. But it *was* worth while to stand in a barouche up to your neck in muslin with the fast ones who had won their glove-bets, thanking you for 'putting them on,' and the quiet ones, who wanted to have a look at the winner, leaning over your shoulder to see his jockey go to scale; and a 'monkey' at least to the credit-side of your own book landed in about a minute and a half. But what's the use of talking about it? You've seen

it all yourself. Bless you, I know your face as well as my own; and, forgive me for saying, if it wasn't for your beard I could put a name to it, I'm sure. Well, sir, this sort of thing has but one fault that I know of—it's too good to last. The better the liquor, you know, the sooner you get to the end of the bottle. I made a bad hit or two in the money-market, and I lost a cracker backing Armstrong's lot for the Derby. If you were there, you'll agree with me that Belphegor was pulled. There never was so gross a case. The Rejected goes and wins the Two Thousand. I myself saw him tried with his stable companion, and the latter beat him by three lengths in a mile and a half. The worst of the two was five pounds better than anything else in the race. What is the result? When they come out at Epsom, Belphegor runs third for the Derby; the other horse is nowhere; and Armstrong wins the largest stake in the ring. I tell you it was a robbery—the biggest of the year. They put me in the hole, the scoundrels! and I've never had a chance at them since. I was forced to go abroad for a while; but I got into some money from a cousin soon after, and paid up everything. I had enough to live on; and if I could have kept out of the market I might have done well. I married a wife, too, and took a pretty little house near London, where we lived quietly and comfortably enough. I have often thought since that this was the happiest time of my life. She was a good contented soul, ay, and a pretty one, too. It's so long since I've seen a real fresh Englishwoman, it does me good to think of her, with her soft brown hair and her gentle quiet ways.

There's nothing like 'em, to my fancy; and I dare say you agree with me?'

Gilbert subscribed willingly to his companion's sentiments. He had formed his own ideal of woman's beauty, and was not likely to depart from a standard that was seldom absent from his thoughts, that he had looked on again only last night in his dreams. We have each of us our different pattern. I have seen Titian's Venus, every bit of her, and Canova's, and nearly all the Madonnas. I can fancy the Anadyomene rising in the lustre of her charms, fresh and radiant, from the sparkling wave—can picture to myself the deep eyes, the queenly brow, the loving lips, the glowing limbs, and rich ambrosial tresses, wreathed in shells and gold. And yet—and yet! to me a worn stained glove, a withered leaf, crushed and sapless as my own old heart, can recal more of beauty, more of worship, more of longing, loving sorrow, than Titian's colours, or Canova's marble, than all the Madonnas with all their holy perfections, nay, than the shining vision itself of Love's majestic goddess, offspring of the sea and sky.

Gilbert's standard was a fair one enough. He liked to think of her whilst he led his companion to talk on of those peaceful days.

'There's a deal of confinement about a married life,' proceeded the latter; 'and at last, what with speculations failing, and Consols dropping all at once, not to mention a continual run of ill-luck with "the bones," I saw no way out of it but "to bolt." So I broke it to "the missis" one fine morning, and sailed that same night. Short notice, you'll say, sir; and so it was.

But women are like horses in many ways, and in none more than this: that we never know what they can do till we try them. She was a regular trump, that wife of mine. I left her what I could in the way of furniture and odds and ends, but she made me take every rap of money she could muster, poor thing! And she put up all her little trinkets in a packet, and thrust it into my hand when I started. There's only one of them left, but I'll never part with it as long as I live. Look ye. Here it is!'

He drew a small gold bracelet from his breast as he spoke, and handed it to Gilbert, who examined it with the reverence due to a husband's last memorial from his wife. It wanted cleaning sadly, and was worn and frayed here and there, where it had nestled against bowie-knife or revolver, or some such uncongenial companion. Many a strange scene had that little keepsake witnessed, many an unholy orgie and wild midnight carouse. Yet, bad as he was, the man had the grace to lay it aside upon occasion rather than pollute the only link he had with a purer, fairer state of being passed away for evermore. There were times, too, in his adventurous life, when he was penniless, that the sale of such an article would have brought twenty times its cost amongst his reckless, half-savage associates. But no! some inward feeling he could not define bade him rather starve than part with his wife's farewell gift. He said as much while he laid it away once more within his breast; and Gilbert, keenly alive to all such impressions, vowed in his heart that there was good in the man, after all, and that he

would do everything in his power to benefit him ere they should part.

'I'd a *curious* run of ill-luck,' he proceeded, 'after I came to the colony. First I failed in one line, then in another; at last I got so involved I was forced to cut and run. Come! you're a good chap and a gentleman. I don't mind telling *you*. I made them put my death in the papers. I changed my name. I started fresh in a new line; and got on like a house on fire. It's a long time ago now. I've never heard from England since. Sometimes I've thought I'd write; but what's the use? She thinks she has been a widow for years—perhaps she has married again. I hope she's got one that is kind to her? I don't often bother about it. I can't think what has come over me just now; but somehow to-day I would give my allowance of grog to know what has become of Ada. Hold on, sir! There, you've broke your pipe.'

In effect, Gilbert started and turned pale at the name, breaking in his confusion the cherished pipe that had been so artistically coloured by many weeks of judicious smoking. It took him a minute or two to reflect that there might be more Adas than one in the world; and that it was neither rational nor manly to allow the enunciation of three letters to produce such an effect on his demeanour. These proper names are sufficiently cabalistic in their effects. I have seen a life-guardsman, six feet two, with moustaches down to his elbows, utterly put to confusion by a discerning little lady five years of age. The champion good-humouredly asked her name. 'Dora,' answered that

matter-of-fact personage, in one of those clear childish trebles which command immediate attention from a whole dinner-table, 'you know it is, because I heard you say it twice when you were looking at "Aunt Dottie's" picture in the library.'

Ambrosial whiskers somewhat shaded and toned down the blushes of that helpless dragoon; but poor 'Aunt Dottie,' who wore her hair *à l'Impératrice*, remained considerably pinker than usual for the rest of the evening. Well, well, Frank Grant has painted a better picture of her now than the one in the library; and she has got a rival already in the affections of her incautious captain, a sturdy little rival, whose name is also Dora, and who screams and tussles lustily to go to papa.

The adventurer picked up the broken fragments of the pipe, and returned them to their owner.

It must have been something in the pallor of Gilbert's face that recalled his features as they had appeared on race-courses and at cricket-matches long ago, before he had become bronzed by an Australian sun, for his companion gave his thigh a slap, as a man does when a bright thought has flashed across him, and exclaimed exultingly,

'I remember you now. I can tell you where I saw you last; they pointed you out to me as a heavy loser when Potiphar broke down at Goodwood. Your name is Orme.'

Gilbert owned the fact, and his friend seized him cordially by the hand.

'It's strange we should make acquaintance for the first time out here. You're a gentleman, I know—I can trust you—my real name is Latimer!'

Latimer! Then it *was* Ada—his Ada—the Ada who had visited him in his morning dreams not six hours ago, when he lay by this man's side! Reader, have you ever had a knock-down blow that has crushed, and stunned, and stupified you all at once? You cannot describe the feeling, you cannot analyze it. You can scarcely call that dumb, helpless suffering by the name of pain. Pain is something to bear, something to fight with and rebel against; something, at worst, under which you can writhe, and gnash your teeth, and call upon your God. Something to which you feel in justice there must be a limit. Pain comes to-morrow, when you wake to the sense of your bereavement or your grief, and lift up your voice and pray in mercy that you may die, it is not pain that you endure all to-night in that dull, dead stupor, turning doggedly to the wall with a misty notion that it is but a dream, and waking, all will be well. There is a limit to bodily suffering, and your doctor calls it syncope—there is a limit to mental agony, and your friends call it madness; but oh, what tortures will the brain not bear before it reels into frenzy! what a weight of sorrow must be laid upon the poor heart before it breaks altogether and acknowledges that henceforth there is no hope! Who that has suffered here on earth (and which of us is there can say, 'I have not drunk from the bitter cup, nor eaten of the bread of affliction?) that shall dare to speculate on the torments of a lost soul? Can any human imagery come near that thrilling metaphor of 'the worm that dieth not, and the fire that is not quenched?' And yet, how far may not even this fall short of the awful reality? I shudder to con-

template sufferings to which our past experiences shall but bear the same proportion as does Time to Eternity. Sufferings such as we cannot imagine, although we have quivered in anguish here, although we have been bruised, and mangled, and crushed into the dust; sufferings from which the friend who never failed us yet will turn away indifferent, and of which the sting shall be increased ten-fold, by the maddening consciousness of what is, and what *might* have been.

Gilbert felt like a man under a sun-stroke. It was strange that Latimer did not notice his utter prostration of mind and body, his vague replies, his wandering glances, scanning earth and heaven as it were for help, or explanation, or relief. But Ada's husband was busy with his own reflections. He had unbosomed himself to-day, for the first time for years, and the very act of telling his own story had led him insensibly back into the past. He was lost in a labyrinth of recollections, and for a time remained as silent and abstracted as the stupified man by his side.

So they sat on, watching the shadows lengthening by degrees, and one grew drowsy at last, and slept, and one remained in a fixed rigid posture, with the sweat pouring from his white face, and his eyes staring vacantly on the landscape, where the sun shone down so pitiless, and the mocking breeze swept by with a cruel laugh. There was that in his heart which turned God's fairest works to a horror and a curse.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE TEMPTATION.

HE has great suggestive powers, that arch enemy, who, for so many centuries has studied the habits of his prey. Doth not the angler's cunning skilfully adapt his devices to the appetites of his hungry victims? For the fastidious trout a delicate palmer; the lob-worm for greedy gudgeons; and to enthral the stately salmon, who but gaudy 'meg-in-her-braws?' So, brother, my bait may be a snug sinecure, yours a white shoulder or a twinkling ankle. Orpheus goes down the broad road willingly because Eurydice beckons him from the far end. John Smith has no objection in life to the same journey for half-a-crown a day and his beer. Each is promised his price, and save wise Lord Soulis, who reserved a right to his own soul if his body should be neither *in* a church nor *out* of a church, and who did in effect cause himself to be buried beneath the church wall, I have never heard of one who could cozen the great cozener of the human race. Many shapes and aspects, too, are his—from the serpent crawling on its belly, to the bright splendour of the morning star; perhaps the most dangerous of all the forms he can assume is that in which he fell. We may do battle

with the fiend, but who shall say to the radiant angel, 'Avoid thee, and tempt me no more?' Many instruments has he also in his workshop, keen and polished, and ready for immediate use. He will place them in your hand at a moment's notice. Ere you have time to think, you may have cut away the cord for ever that moors you to your haven. Last night, full of bread, and hot with wine, you longed for the breath of beauty to cool your brow, and lo! she was there, smiling, and fragrant, and lively; so you held out your wrists for the shackles, and bound yourself hand and foot, and did homage to her you had abjured, and became a vassal and a slave once more. Next Sunday going humbly to your prayers, a thousand little annoyances and irritations will spring up like weeds and nettles in your path, to draw your eyes and thoughts to earth from heaven. Your servants will mutiny at sun-rise, your womankind will vex you at breakfast, the friend of your boyhood will ill-use you about a deed. Irritated and impatient, you will curse the crossing-sweeper who splashes you, even at the church door. In great matters and in little, one furnishes the opportunity and the means. It is the same hand that rumples the rose-leaf to spoil a potentate's temper for the day, and that proffers the ready noose in which a maddened mother strangles the child of shame. Only you be willing to do his work, and he will take care that you shall never want for tools.

Latimer slept heavily once more. The fatigue of many successive days of severe labour had told even on his hardened frame. Notwithstanding his previous night's rest, he lay like a man who was thoroughly in

want of repose, every limb relaxed and helpless, whilst his deep, regular breathing attested a slumber disturbed neither by dreams nor anxieties. His companion sat motionless by his side, it might have been for hours—he never knew; suddenly he started and looked down at the sleeper. It seemed strange to Gilbert that any man could lie so still unless he were dead. *Unless he were dead.* He kept repeating the words unmeaningly to himself; now with slow monotonous distinctness, now in a sort of wild chant to which they set themselves unbidden. *Unless he were dead.* And what was this death of which men made such a bugbear; which many affronted knowingly and willingly, which all men must often unconsciously approach? This man—this *Latimer.* Oh God! that he should bear that name; how it tore him to think of it! this Latimer, then, must have been near it very often. In the course of his wild adventurous career must have learned to look upon it without terror, scarcely with aversion; must have prepared many a time for the shock—nay, it was but one of the chances and casualties to which all were liable, none more than those who were travelling alone through this trackless Australian wilderness. He himself ran the same risk; truly in such a country a man may be said to carry his life in his hand. Was it really so valuable a possession? Could one more or less, indeed, make so much difference in the great scheme?

Unless he were dead. If he *were* dead he would hardly look different, lying there so still. How easy it would be for a bushranger or such lawless brigand to rob him as he slept! How easy if he woke to quiet him for ever; how simple to dig a hole down yonder in

the mud by that winding creek, and hide all evidence of the crime. A bushranger would do it for the value of his powder-horn. So different with different men is the standard of crime; and the bushranger would camp at night with but little additional remorse that he had one more murder on his conscience. Suppose such a thing were to happen. Suppose some merciless ruffian were to come upon him now in his sleep, and there were none to help, and the body were taken away and hidden! Then would to-day be as if it had never been. Then would he, Gilbert Orme, be once more as he was when he awoke this morning. A time that seemed to be centuries ago. There would be still a fair world for him, and a laughing sky, and a hopeful future, and heaven at the end. Who was this man that he should thus have come between him and his happiness? A happiness the man himself had voluntarily resigned and abandoned. What right had he to the rose he had thrown wilfully away, the gem of which he never knew, never *could* have known the value? Then he thought of the brightness of the gem, the sweetness of the flower; thought of her as he saw her the first time they ever met; the last time when she blessed him while they parted, and his brain reeled, and 'his punishment was greater than he could bear.'

Unless he were dead. Gilbert Orme felt the edge and point of his gleaming knife—how cold and bright it was! He thought of the quick turn of John's wrist as his blade crossed the poor kangaroo's throat, and the smoking blood leaping so freely from the wound. It was a horrible fascination to think how easily such things could be done. It was a relief from the crush-

ing effects of the blow he had sustained, to reflect on any other subject in the world, most of all on this. If he had not been an educated man and a gentleman; nay, if he had even been inured to scenes of blood and violence, it would not seem so impracticable to get rid of that sleeping man. Not while he slept,—oh no! that would be cowardice added to crime; but a brave unscrupulous spirit might surely wake his enemy, and so giving him an equal chance, grapple with him to the death. What was it, then, but a life taken in fair fight, after all? It would be easy to call him a bush-ranger, and talk about an attempt at violence and a resolute defence. If it went the other way, and he were himself a victim? Ah! better so, better any death, than to live without Ada. The very name softened him. Again his fancy wandered and his brain reeled; his hand closed tight on the hunting-knife, but his eyes were fixed on a fair picture painted in glowing colours, such as human artist never yet could grind.

He saw the pretty breakfast-room in the old house at West-Acres, with his father's portrait on the wall, and windows opening to the park, where the old trees were bursting into a tender green, and the deer leaping amongst the fern in the fair spring sunshine. He saw a gentle lady sweeping in with her own quiet grace and calm matronly smile, to take her rightful place opposite his chair, where the light rippled off her shining tresses, and the deep soft eyes grew deeper and softer in the shade. He saw little children with the dear mother's face playing round her, clinging to the soft hand, or holding by the muslin folds of that simple

morning dress. He saw the neatness, the order, and the sacred beauty of a Home; far off he saw the gradual descent into the vale of years, and the gates of heaven shining yonder on the mountain, and the long pathway they would travel hand in hand. Then he looked down and saw Latimer sleeping, more stilly, more heavily than ever man slept yet, *unless he were dead.*

He put the knife back into its sheath. A new thought struck him: he was mad—he knew he was mad; and yet he could reason now calmly, logically, and by consequence. The revolver was the more efficient weapon; one touch to its trigger and the thing was done. He possessed himself of Latimer's pistol, and examined it carefully. All five chambers were loaded; one of them would be sufficient for the purpose; he would be no murderer, not he!—but this man and himself should have an equal chance for life. Thus he argued: they could not both live and be happy; one must give way; fate should determine the victim. He would draw lots, his own life against this man's—a murder or a suicide—and abide by the issue! Ha, ha! Was that mocking laugh from heaven or hell? Did it come from the bush behind him, or the sleeper at his feet? Surely not from his own lips! Again it was repeated harshly, distinctly. Laugh on, good devil, laugh on! We are busy about your work; we will come to you for our wages by and bye.

That laugh of Gilbert's must have disturbed him, for the sleeper stirred and turned, and muttered indistinctly. Even then his enemy hoped it was a

prayer, and though his finger was on the trigger he stooped down to listen. Latimer must have been dreaming, for he said, 'Ada, Ada!' twice over, and breathing heavily, was immediately asleep again.

The words acted on Gilbert like a spell. His whole frame shook and shivered; he laid the pistol on the ground quite gently, and sat down confused and breathless. He felt faint and sick at heart. The man belonged to Ada after all, and he would have killed him —killed Ada's husband!—one whom she at least had cherished and valued, who had loved her, who perhaps loved her even now. Killed him! oh no! He must have been mad; he, who would prize a dog for Ada's sake. He felt kindly now towards the very man against whom he had well-nigh lifted a murderer's red hand but one short minute back. For Ada's sake! Never till that moment had he known how much he loved her. Does the brightness of heaven, think ye, glow with half such splendour to the exulting seraphim as to the poor lost spirit, turning sadly from the light to its own portion of darkness for evermore?

Then the reaction came on, and he fled into the bush and threw himself on his face in the long grass, and wept tears of blood. God help him! had he fallen on his knees and thanked his Maker for his deliverance from the guilt of murder, crying aloud for mercy, that the rod might be spared, the burden lightened, if ever such a little,—I think even then it had been the saving of my boy.

John Gordon came back with the fresh horses as he had promised, and day after day the three men journeyed

on together in brotherly kindness and good-fellowship through the bush; but when Gilbert arrived at Sydney there were white hairs in the soft brown beard, and a wistful look in the worn, anxious face that had never been there before, that never left it afterwards.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE AUSTRALIAN MAIL.

HAPPINESS is a wondrous beautifier. No cordial or cosmetic has ever yet been invented to impart such a lustre to the eyes, such a brilliancy to the skin. Under its influence even the withered branch seems to blossom into leaf; how much more, then, does it enhance the bloom of a flower glowing in its summer prime. As Ada walked along the streets, people turned round to look at her. There was a buoyancy in her gait, a brightness in her glance, a colour in her cheek, that betrayed a heart overflowing with its own deep sense of joy. And well might she be happy. Was she not a woman, and had she not won the treasure which is woman's most coveted possession? They can do very well without it. I have not lived to the age at which 'grizzling hair the brain doth clear,' to subscribe to the aphorisms of poets and romancers, who affirm that love is the essence of female existence. Not a bit of it. I know hundreds, and so do you, who tread the daily path contentedly enough, unscathed by the arrows of the mischievous boy, and scarcely even brushed by his wings, just as I have seen many a sweet flower reared in a dark close chamber, watered from a broken jug, and screened by envious chimney-

pots from the genial rays of the morning sun. But of course if you transplant the flower into a garden, if you place her where she can bask in the smiles of the day-god, and open her petals to the showers of heaven, she will out-bloom her former self in her new prosperity, even as bleak, barren March is out-bloomed by the merry month of June.

Ada was no longer young. I mean that her heart and intellect were matured, although she was still in the noontide of her womanhood. As a girl her affections had remained untouched. In her married life she had indeed suffered sundry vague longings and imaginings to cross her fancy as to certain items which *might* constitute mortal happiness, but had concluded, and justly, that it was but the portion of a favoured few, and that she for one must be content to dispense with the golden lot. That she tried hard to love Latimer I honestly believe. Alas, that in such endeavours the success is seldom in proportion to the effort. Alas, that the hot-house flower should be so difficult to force, while the corresponding weed we would fain eradicate spreads and germinates and thrives the more for all our labour to cut it down and tear it out and trample it to the ground.

When Ada's husband left her, she felt alone in the world, and the sensation was rather a relief. When she heard of his death at Sydney, the few natural tears she dropped were soon dried, and it seemed to her no novel nor altogether unwelcome situation to be isolated and self-dependent. She had no near relatives left; she had no child about which her heart could cling. She accepted her lot with a sort of

bitter resignation, and flattered herself that she was a hard, sensible, unimaginative sort of person, for whom the matter-of-fact and the practical were all in all. She, with her father's warm, generous heart, and her mother's dreamy German temperament, and her own soft kindly disposition! How little we know ourselves. Why, at one time of her life, when she began giving lessons to Lady Gertrude, she was actually distrustful of her own beauty, thought she was losing her colour and growing old, pondered on the effect a few years would have, and wished her outward appearance as different as possible, like a fool as she was.

Certain philosophers opine that the softer sex are very much alike. One of the bitterest affirms

Most women have no characters at all.

I would do battle on each of these points to the death. In the first place, every woman is from herself most dissimilar, and this fact alone multiplies the variety of the species *ad infinitum*. It is surely a logical sequence that where one specimen is multiform, the class cannot be homogeneous. With regard to their want of character, is it not allowed on all sides that the principal distinctive quality of the female mind is a positive adherence to its own opinions, that its intuitive perceptions are of the keenest and most incontrovertible? Also that its resolution and tenacity of purpose remain entirely unshaken by extraneous influences, such as argument, expediency, plain reason, or even the all-important consideration of self-interest. What is this but force of character of the strongest

and most undeniable? I think I have made out my case.

Other women might not have felt as Ada felt; other women might not have acted as she did. She was one by herself, and I never knew such another; nor was I the only man that thought so.

Well, after she had made up her mind to live in darkness all her life, the light began to dawn upon her. Can you blame her that she turned to it, and opened her eyes wide, stretching her arms towards the east, and preparing to bask in the sunbeams? Can you blame her that, hour by hour, as the rays increased in warmth and brilliance, she bathed and steeped her whole being as it were in the golden floods? Science tells us there is no such thing as colour in the dark, that a red coat is *not* a red coat, nor a peach-coloured silk any more peach-coloured than it is a peach; that the action of light on the particles which constitute their surface produces the effect we choose to term colour, and that where the light is not, the colour is not. I accept unhesitatingly whatever science thinks well to offer, and am quite willing to believe, the more that I cannot understand; but I think I know of another light also 'that never was on sea or shore,' which imparts its own hues to every object on which it plays, and when it is withdrawn leaves the red coat but a sad-coloured garment, the peach-silk a dull and dreary weed.

In the mean time, though the early spring days were dark and cold, though Belgrave-square was a sufficiently cheerless locality at that time of year, though the other street-passengers looked chill and cross, with muffled chins and angry red noses, Ada walked on in

the halo of an artificial lustre, and, influenced by its glamour, saw all material objects under an aspect of her own. The leafless trees glowed like the gardens of Paradise; the dingy houses outshone that magic city flaming with gems and paved with virgin ore, which to this day the Mexican beholds in his dreams and the enterprising traveller seeks in vain. The muddy macadamized street gleamed like the golden waters of Cathay. How happy she was—how supremely happy! Life seemed to have nothing more to offer than what she had already, or what a few weeks would surely bring. What a joyous world it was—what bliss only to live and love—what a bountiful Creator who thus lavished blessings on his children! Whatever the future might have in store, it was something to experience such happiness as she did to-day! Her full heart thanked Heaven in a silent prayer. As it did so a misgiving came across her, not for the first time, that she had been wanting in her duty to her love.

'Ada was a pure-hearted and a trusting woman—one, moreover, who had known sorrow and adversity. Need I say that a strong religious sense—an implicit confidence in the protection of the Almighty—was to her as the very air she breathed? Once or twice she had touched upon the most sacred of topics in conversation with Gilbert. Each time from a feeling of diffidence, and unwillingness to approach the one important subject of time and eternity, she had left unsaid much that she now regretted. Since she parted from him she had often reproached herself for this negligence. Like all those who feel themselves supremely happy, she could not forbear speculating on the uncertain tenure by

which she held this cherished happiness—could not help picturing to herself casualties and dangers and possibilities, and wondering what she should do if any fearful dispensation should separate them for ever. With a woman's self-abnegation, she had hitherto looked upon herself as the chief sufferer, had remembered the only refuge for human sorrow, the only altar on which to lay a broken heart. To-day, for the first time, she knew not why, it occurred to her what would become of Gilbert in any possible catastrophe if his grief should equal her own. He had not the same resources, the same aid. Why had she not taught him where to look while there was yet time, before he left her? She almost regretted now her determination that he should absent himself for a stated period. She wished—oh, how longingly—that she had him back all to herself, to cherish and care for and lead on the heavenward path. What was pride now, or prudence or common sense, as compared to his welfare? Then it was anxious, weary work, this long absence, uncheered even by a single letter. True she had herself expressly forbidden him to write, but surely—surely—he might have disobeyed her. She did not think she would have been so *very* angry. Perhaps he had not thought of it. Perhaps he had no leisure. Ah, if she had been in his place, she would not have been deterred by want of time or means; no, nor by an express prohibition. But of course he could not care for her as she did for him—that was out of the question. Would she wish it? Yes, she began to think she would.

What self-torturers they are! You see that even in Ada's cup, brimming as it was, lurked the bitter drop

which, more or less, qualifies the sweetness of every earthly draught. You may stud the goblet with gems, or wreathe it with flowers, and fill it with nectar to the edge, there is a fine tonic flavour somewhere, do what you will. Quaff it off thankfully, nevertheless, and be glad that you can taste the sugar at all. For nine out of every ten of us the crystal is foul, and the contents wormwood.

Twice a week, at an early hour, Ada went to Belgrave-square. On these red-letter days she instructed Lady Gertrude in her own art, for it is needless to state that the lessons had been resumed immediately on the pupil's return to town, much to the delight of the mistress. She had often argued the point in her own mind, as to whether it was judicious thus to familiarize herself with Gilbert's family, and almost always came to the conclusion at which she wished to arrive, viz., that it was advisable to do so by every means in her power. In the first place, should it ever be her lot to reach the summit of earthly happiness—which, like all other summits, came to look more and more practicable the oftener she contemplated it—she would prefer that they should have become thoroughly acquainted with her in her professional character, and accept her, if they accepted her at all, as the humble teacher whom they had been good enough to patronise (there was no little pride in this, Ada, if you only knew it). In the second, if, as was too possible, something should occur to dash the cup of happiness from her lips, was it not well to rivet every link and strengthen every tie that could connect her by the power of association with those to whom he belonged? The latter consideration was sel-

dom absent from her mind. There were times when it seemed *impossible* that such a dream as hers could be realized; when all sorts of contingencies would force themselves upon her; when she could not but mistrust the influence of absence, time, circumstances, fate itself, and wonder what she should do then. Fancy being told that she was to see Gilbert no more! She felt it would go near to break her heart; and there would be but one consolation left to have indentified herself with all belonging to him. There are hot and cold fits in love as in the ague. Ada turned out of Halkin-street, as I have said, in the full glow of the former, but her moral teeth chattered, so to speak, and her moral being shivered all over ere she arrived at her destination in Belgrave-square. She was earlier than usual; indeed, Mrs. Latimer was always somewhat fidgety on these Tuesdays and Thursdays, and as she entered the hall she heard Lady Gertrude's voice on the stairs inquiring if the post had come in, and distinctly caught the words 'Australian mail,' addressed to some one in the back drawing-room. The bare mention of that dependency brought Ada's heart into her mouth, and she was so nervous when Lady Gertrude sat down to her music-book, that she could hardly turn over the leaves.

Her ladyship, too, was restless and uneasy. To do him justice, Gilbert, during his absence, had been pretty regular in his correspondence with his cousin. She looked forward to these yellow ship-letters with an eager longing. It would have been flattering to Mr. Orme, could he have seen how the dark eyes flashed as she tore them open, how the straight brows knit (Lady Gertrude's brows were a little too straight) as she devoured

them, page by page; and how the whole countenance softened ever and anon at the description of some bush adventure, or colonial sport, shared with his friend. Also he might have been a little puzzled to account for the look of disappointment with which some of these epistles were closed, and the dreamy listlessness which would overcome that otherwise energetic young lady for days after their perusal.

On the present occasion, she was peculiarly inattentive and preoccupied. She sang false, she played too fast, at last she shut up the piano-forte, and turned to her instructress—

'I am out of tune to-day,' said she, 'a little out of temper, too, perhaps. Oh, Mrs. Latimer, I wish I were you!'

'Why?' asked the latter, whose own state of beatitude, conscious as she was of it herself, did not seem to her so obvious to the world in general.

'Because you are always the same,' was the emphatic reply; 'because you never seem to me to have worries like other people. You never look flurried, or hurried, or disordered. You are always in harmony. I do not believe, now, that you have an anxiety in the world.'

Ada shook her head, perhaps a little sadly. She ought not to feel so, she knew it; and yet who so anxious, who so restless, who sometimes so discontented as herself?

'I have been disappointed to-day,' resumed Lady Gertrude, 'annoyed, provoked! here's another mail come in, I know it's arrived, for there's the Sydney paper, and no letter from Gilbert—Mr. Orme, I mean

—so thoughtless, so unfeeling. Isn't it too bad of him?'

She turned her piercing eyes full upon her listener while she spoke. Ada's heart began to beat very fast; her colour came and went; she looked as if she 'had worries like other people.'

'When did you hear last?' she gasped; for she must say something, though she knew quite well; having, indeed, on that occasion, considerably out-stayed her time, once more exciting harrowing speculations in the infant minds at Bayswater, to hear tidings of his welfare.

Lady Gertrude had a way of not answering questions which seemed to her irrelevant. She was, moreover, a little surprised at the manifest agitation displayed by the music-mistress. So she pursued the thread of her own reflections, keeping her bright eyes fastened the while on the face of the other, who winced, and flushed, and faltered beneath her gaze.

'The only way I can account for it,' said she, 'is that he may possibly have arrived in person by this mail. Even if he has, it is stupid and inconsiderate not to write a line from Southampton to say so. Perhaps he means to surprise us, and walk in with a long beard, as if he had dropped from the clouds! Let me see, he might have landed last night, and come by the ten o'clock train, which would bring him here just about now. What fun if he did! There's a cab stopping at the door at this moment. Good gracious, Mrs. Latimer! you look as if you were going to faint. Let me ring the bell.'

Poor Ada, no wonder she turned pale; no wonder

these voluble surmises of her pupil, and the suggested surprise, which after all did not seem so impossible, took away her breath! She prevented the bell being rung, and summoned all her forces to stand upright and take her leave forthwith, vowing 'that she was quite well, quite well, only a little heated, the fire was so powerful; and that she was already very late. Good morning; Lady Gertrude would be in better voice another day. She must really not lose a minute; she must be gone.'

I wonder if anything on earth would have tempted Ada to remain and risk the interview for which she had longed so many weary months. She felt almost as if she had rather never see him again, than risk a first meeting in the presence of others, especially this sharp-eyed cousin, of whom, truth to tell, she was always a little jealous and a little afraid. She had pictured to herself a quiet drama confined to two performers, of which the scene should be the spot where they parted in Kensington Gardens. She had even determined in her own mind how he would look, and what he would say. She had settled it all. He would come back true as ever, and would be a little hurt and disappointed to find her so cold, so formal; then he would ask her if indeed absence had taught her to forget him? and she would remind him of their compact, and free him once more, and bid him be happy with some one better suited to him; and tell him she had done all for the best for both their sakes. Then he would be angry and violent, and reproach her, vowing to leave her for ever, and she would be sure (as if she were not sure now) that he

was still the same. How delicious it would be to give way entirely then, and confess herself his own here and hereafter.

But this charming little programme could not be conveniently carried out with Lady Gertrude for audience; and Ada was not without that strange instinct of womanhood, the first impulse of which seems to be to fly from what it most desires. So she collected her gloves, handkerchief, and music-roll, with trembling haste, and hurrying from the room, confronted—Lady Olivia.

Now it is hardly necessary to observe that the demeanour of that austere lady towards those whom she was pleased to consider her inferiors, was the reverse of engaging; and that one of the labours of love in which Mrs. Latimer especially delighted, was the endurance of Lady Olivia's condescension and patronage with edifying humility, for her son's sake. On the present occasion the greeting was more severe and majestic than usual; nor, as the music-mistress hurried downstairs with trembling steps, could she avoid hearing the elder lady's comments on her unseemly departure.

'Well, I'm sure,' observed that exemplary person, in her loudest and harshest tones; 'people's time must be very valuable, to go away in such a whirlwind! and whatever her musical proficiency may be, I can't compliment you, my dear, on the *manners* of your mistress.'

Lady Gertrude's rejoinder to this unprovoked attack, though probably none of the meekest, was, however, inaudible in the hall.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE VEILED IMAGE.

ADA hastened home. She felt it absolutely necessary to seek composure in her own room. With all her self-command, on which she plumed herself not a little—with all her womanly pride and reticence—she was not proof against the possibility of *his* return on whom she had pondered so continuously, though so unconsciously, all those weary months. She began to feel at last, what she had hitherto hardly realized, that every thought and action of her daily life had borne reference to him. She could not buy a ribbon without choosing the colour he preferred; she could not cross the street without encountering some object that associated itself with Gilbert. Wet or dry, storm or sunshine, she never missed her walk in Kensington Gardens, never failed to stand in the same place, to conjure up the same vision, till her heart thrilled with a sensation that was very nearly pain. It was pleasant even to toil the week through at those never-ending tasks, and to feel that the discipline and the self-denial made her more worthy of her love; it was intense happiness, on the day of rest, to have nothing else to do but to pray for him,

and long for him, and think of him incessantly from morning till night.

When Alderman Jones' friend Plumber, or the enterprising gentleman who manages the affairs of Stirling Brothers, consigns the produce of a West Indian estate to the treacherous ocean, he does not think well to heap the whole of his venture—his rums, his sugars, his molasses, and his mangoes—in one cargo, for transport by one frail bark, however well found in the appliances of her class. When good Dame Trot rides the blind mare to market she does not judge it expedient to put all her eggs in the same basket. On the contrary, the goods of the cautious Plumber or the far-seeing Stirlings float on various bottoms over the greedy wave, so that the loss on sugars may be balanced by the gain on rum; so that if the molasses go down, the mangoes ride triumphantly into port. Also, thrifty Dame Trot, warned by previous downfalls of the blind mare, while she carries some of her eggs with the cheese and butter in the basket on her arm, consigns the fresh-laid ones, pink and transparent at their ends, to the care of her honest Gaffer trudging safely afoot by the highway, scanning with critical eye the well-tilled glebe, a shrewd man and a cautious, taking thought in his dealings, but standing word to his bargains, a willing husbandman, and not averse to beer.

Warned by these wise examples, it is judicious to carry out the principle *divide et impera* in the moral world. As a general rule, ladies, I would say, cut up your affections into small parcels, neatly made up, and tied with a breast-knot or a tress of hair. Distribute these samples impartially amongst your admirers—the

more the merrier, of course, for the greater the number the less the size, and consequently the risk, of each individual packet. If Jack is false or unfortunate, or makes himself ridiculous, either of which causes is sufficient reason for dropping him at once, what matter? Tom, Harry, and the rest preserving each his share make up a fair aggregate. Tom, Harry, and the rest will console you sufficiently, if indeed consolation be required. Think of what your plight would have been if Jack had carried the whole freight, and so gone down. Limp, dejected, your hair in plain bands, and without an atom of crinoline, you must have wandered by the willows, a maiden all forlorn, instead of queening it still in bower and ball-room, radiant, captivating, *bouffée*, and heartless. As for poor Jack, never mind him, though he may be in prison, or in disgrace, or gone to the wars, or the dogs, or the devil; that is his affair, not yours. Everybody knows that men have no feeling, that cigars, race-horses, or campaigning, will console them for the most harrowing disappointments; and even if poor Jack *should* go down in the front-rank, to be stripped of that little packet aforesaid, only when the broad breast on which it nestled is cold for evermore, that is his own stupid fault. Why could he not take a leaf out of your book, impartial fair one? To soar aloft, false, flattered, and unscathed, rather than thus to fall, true-hearted and alone.

Alas for Ada! that she was not one of these wiser sisters. Alas for her! that her cargo was heaped and stowed away by deck and hold, till the waters lipped the gunwale, that the eggs were crowding and hurtling in the narrow basket, and never a one left to tempt the

bird back to her cold empty nest, when she had spread her wings and flown away.

The dove fluttered home to her cage, and sat down to think, to brood over her coming happiness, and stifle the misgivings that *would* cast their shadows athwart the promise of the sunny future. On her table lay a letter addressed to her in the handwriting of an agent with whom she had not corresponded for years. In good truth, Ada's bankers sustained no heavy load of responsibility. Carelessly she opened the envelope, and its enclosure fell out upon the floor. As the sealed side turned uppermost, she perceived it was a ship letter; and concluding that it could have come from but one correspondent over the water, her eyes filled with tears of joy as she pressed it eagerly to her heart before tearing it open to devour the contents. Then she read on, word by word and line by line, to the very end. Here it is:—

'Dearest Ada,—You will, I fancy, be surprised to see my handwriting once more; and I hope you will forgive me any pain I may have caused you by one of those dodges that the pressure from without obliged me to practise, much against my will. I am an honest fellow enough, I believe, as times go; and had I not learned that you still bear my name, I would never have troubled you again, but kept dark on my own hook, and allowed you to believe that poor old Will had gone under once for all. Well, dear, the water has been over my head many a long day, but I've come up pretty dry notwithstanding. You know I always had a knack of getting afloat again after a capsize. Bad

times I have had of it since I saw my own name amongst the deaths in the Sydney papers; but it is a long lane that has no turning; and things have come round of late better than I had reason to expect. I shall have some queer stories to tell you when we meet —for meet we shall, Ada, I am determined, and that before very long. I have purchased some lots up the country that answer considerably better than my first venture; and I am not one of those people who wish to go on buying experience all their lives. I shall hold on for a favourable time, and then realize. If the thing comes off as I expect, I shall land a pretty good stake, and come straight home. Will you take me back, Ada? and let bygones be bygones? I sometimes think you had a hardish time of it, my dear; but we have both of us seen a deal of rough usage since then; and I hope it will be different in future. I've had to work hard for my plunder; and they shan't skin me again, not if I know it. I sometimes think I'll be with you before the cuckoo begins to sing; and I feel somehow as if it would do me good to see Old England and your kind face once again. I've got your bracelet, Ada, still: I've stuck by it through many a rough job; but I never thought to see its owner again.

'I came through the Bush awhile ago with a chap that knew you, and had heard you sing. His name is Gordon, a likely lad enough, and one of the right sort, but uncommon sharp. However, he did me a good turn camping out one night; and I never forget either the man that puts me on, or the man that lets me in. He had a pal with him who beats me altogether: they call him Orme, a tip-top swell, and a face I remembered

to have seen before in the old country. He's mad, I guess, for he never speaks to any one, and a man wouldn't give a hundred dollars to speak to him. He's got a cross game look about him, for as mild as he is. Poor chap, I think he's had bad news from England, for when I was bragging to him about going home, he turned quite white, and trembled. He's not one of the chicken-hearted ones neither. But this makes no odds to you or to me.

'Don't expect me, Ada, till you see me. You remember of old I never could bear to be tied to time. But be sure I shall come home before the fall, and that I am always

'Your very affectionate,
'William Latimer.

'Sydney, 18th.'

She had the courage of a lion, that gentle Ada. She read every word of her letter over again, examined the postmark, compared it with the date, folded it, locked it away in her desk, and then tottering across the room caught at the back of a chair to save herself from falling on the floor. As she did so she saw her own white face in the glass, and wondered vaguely whether those parted lips and dull protruding eyes could belong to Ada Latimer. It was no question now of vexation, or sorrow, or resistance—no case of accepting or refusing the bitter draught, or disguising its taste, or otherwise making the best of it. Not so. The hammer had fallen. At one blow it had shivered the goblet into a thousand particles, and the liquid—good, bad, or indif-

ferent—had vanished soaking in the plain. Not a fragment nor a drop remained.

For a minute or so the feeling of suffocation, I mean the physical feeling, was unbearable. She strove to cry aloud, but nothing came of it save an inarticulate gasp. She put her hands to her throat, turning wildly round and round like a dumb animal caught in a noose. Then she sank upon her knees—her shoulders heaved, her bosom sobbed to bursting. With the first cry for mercy came the saving tears; and so the crisis of a lifetime was past.

I will leave her alone with her sorrow. There are griefs for which it is mockery to offer consolation. There are losses to which bereavement by death were comparatively a gain. So long as a single strand of rope holds, the human heart will cling to it, and trust in it, as if it were an iron cable. So long as ever the past belongs to us there is a dry spot on which the dove can rest her foot. Alas! for her when she must flit aimlessly to and fro over the dark waters. Alas! when that which *might* have been is but a maddening impossibility—when that which *has* been is but a baseless and uncertain dream. Whilst memory remains we are not all alone. Far, far back in the gloomy perspective sits the immovable image, a long way off indeed, but yet existent; and its glance, cold and stony though it be, turned upon us still. Woe to the utter desolation that is fain to veil the statue of the goddess! Woe to the hand, cold and pitiless as the marble itself, that must needs draw the kerchief

O'er the eyes of Mnemosyne there.

CHAPTER XXXII.

EBB AND FLOW.

BELLA JONES has had no pleasant winter. That young lady is beginning to find out that life is not all a journey down hill in the sunshine. On her, too, is breaking the chill suspicion that childhood, notwithstanding its little restraints and sorrows, may have been the best season, after all. That to be 'grown-up,' means to be 'put to work,' to carry a certain burden, which must, moreover, be carried erect and with a bold front, which is also constantly increasing in sad disproportion to the strength that year by year fails ever such a little, and which no one seems inclined to help his brother wayfarer to bear more easily.

> There's none will weep for thy distress,
> Though friends stand firm and true.
> For in the tangled wilderness
> They bleed and battle too.

Bella, like many another warrior, takes her place in the combat with a confident face and a sinking heart.

She has much to contend with. The Alderman, under the combined influence of gout and anxiety, has become testy and irritable. He will not bear to be

questioned about his affairs, nor listen for an instant to any of his daughter's schemes for retrenchment. At the same time he allows her, as he has always done, to take the entire management of his household. 'Nonsense, Bella,' is his invariable reply to her expostulations; 'girls can't be expected to understand these things. Never show your hand, my dear, whether you've four by honours or haven't a single trump. All you have got to mind is to return your partner's lead; so let me hear no more about it, but do as I bid you.'

She has, nevertheless, her own plans of economy and self-denial. Amongst other gloomy forebodings, she looks forward to the day when her father's servants must be dismissed, and when their present establishment must be reduced to the narrowest possible limits. In anticipation of this evil time, Bella thinks it well to go marketing regularly with Mrs. Garnish, thereby putting a considerable check on that confidential servant's expenditure, the while she herself gets a good many valuable lessons in the difficult art of making both ends meet. Mrs. Garnish, I need hardly observe, disapproves highly of this practice, but submits the more quietly that she has herself certain suspicions of the coming storm, and having already feathered her nest pretty handsomely, is quite prepared to leave the tree so soon as it ceases to shelter her from the wind. Three times a week Bella, in a plain straw hat and quiet gown, was used to accompany that domestic at an early hour to the shops of the different tradespeople, thereby largely reducing the amount of the weekly bills, and giving much dissatisfaction to all concerned.

Thus it fell out that on a certain bleak spring

morning, of which mention has been already made, Miss Jones and her attendant, pervading the streets of that rural city which lies at the back of the Regent's Park, encountered, at the door of a baker's-shop, no less a person than Lord Holyhead; and his lordship, whose mind, though certainly not 'wax to receive,' was doubtless of the order which is 'marble to retain,' stopped to greet her with marked cordiality and delight. Holyhead had not forgotten the episode of the parrot, and never recurred to it without a pleasant recollection of the frank, warm-hearted girl who had tended him so gently, and bound up his wounds with such chirurgical skill.

He quite started with pleasure when he caught sight of her, and leaping from his horse, led the animal by the bridle while he accompanied Miss Jones along the footway, a proceeding which considerably discomfited Mrs. Garnish, but drew down marks of decided approval from a London urchin, who was watching his lordship's movements.

'I have not set eyes on you for months,' said Holyhead, in his kindest tones. 'How lucky to come across you at an hour when I thought ladies were in their first sleep. Why, what an early bird you are, Miss Jones!'

'I am come out marketing,' she answered good-humouredly; 'perhaps you didn't know that was one of my accomplishments. I can buy beef and mutton by the pound, and can tell the weight of a chicken without asking for it to be put in the scales. I've made a capital bargain this morning. Would you like to see what I've got in the basket?'

Mrs. Garnish, who had her own ideas of good breeding, and who held the article above-mentioned, turned on her young mistress a look of angry expostulation.

'I wish I might carry it for you,' said he, 'and take a lesson in so useful an art. But is this only a freak for once? or do you really go out every morning on these foraging expeditions?'

If Lord Holyhead asked this invidious question with a view of facilitating future meetings like the present, he must have been a little disappointed by the grave unconscious tone of Bella's reply.

'Yes,' she said; 'and glad I am to be able to do so. I can be of very little use to my father, I fear; but it is not my fault that I was born a woman. If I were a man I should be at some harder work than this. Oh, how I wish it was all so different!'

He saw she was uneasy in mind, and partly guessed the cause. He was better acquainted than she knew with her father's affairs, and indeed had his own share in some of the Alderman's ventures. He talked on of indifferent subjects for a while, but showed no inclination to get into the saddle again, although they were now returning to the vicinity of Verbena Villa.

Bella had evidently something on her mind. Her manner was constrained, her replies absent and inconsequent. As she neared her home she seemed to nerve herself for an effort. At last she made a plunge, as it were, and got out what she had to say.

'Oh! Lord Holyhead,' stammered Bella, gaining confidence from the vicinity of the garden-gate, 'I have never been able to thank you for your great kindness last year. I am afraid you must think me

very ungrateful; but, indeed, I heard of it, and whenever I have seen you, I have always wanted to tell you how much I—how much we all—felt it. Somehow, I never could get it out till to-day. Thank you *really*. Good bye.'

She was close to the gate now, and put out her hand, blushing bright scarlet. He pressed it very cordially, and wishing her 'Good bye,' jumped on his horse, and was off; nor could Bella have adopted a more expeditious method of getting rid of her cavalier, Lord Holyhead being one of those gentlemen whose insuperable objection to being thanked is the less accountable that they are in the constant habit of perpetrating actions for which thanks can be their only payment.

He had ridden the same road once before with his bridle-hand neatly bound up in a silk handkerchief. It was some months ago, yet had he not forgotten how certain vague ideas crossed his mind then, which bore reference to the villa, the parrot, and other possessions of Alderman Jones. The same current of thought, brighter, more engrossing, yet perhaps not quite so pleasant, took possession of him now. On some minds the force of contrast has a stronger effect than even the influence of association; and Lord Holyhead, as he rode soberly along at a foot's pace, with his rein dangling loose on the neck of his astonished hack, called up in his mind's-eye a picture to which Bella Jones, with her fresh morning colour and her quiet morning toilet, above all, with her frank simplicity and honest diffidence, was as different as light from darkness.

It was not so long since he had been sitting in a

luxurious and beautiful little room, furnished with every appliance that could be thought of for comfort and amusement, rich in gaudy colours, and costly ornaments, which, though not invariably in the best taste, were of high price and indisputable beauty. Groups of choice little statuettes filled the corners, and prints of well-known artists, dramatic and otherwise, adorned the walls. Books, music, flowers, were scattered about the room, and a large pianoforte encumbered its somewhat contracted dimensions, a pianoforte over which Holyhead had ere this hung enraptured, drinking in its tones, as if such draughts were drained from a fountain always sweet, always inexhaustible. A blazing fire gave an air of home to all this brilliancy; and the out-of-doors view, not very engaging in cold spring weather, was shut out by pyramids of exotics, completely blocking up the windows.

Enters on this luxurious little scene a stout dark-browed lady, with her shining bands of hair pressed closely to her temples, and an ominous frown, harbinger of stormy weather, louring on her forehead. She has the sallow complexion and black piercing eyes of the South, also the sharp, shrill tones of the Italian voice, which although capable of being modulated by art into the sweetest of music, commonly strikes harsh and disagreeable on the ear in ordinary conversation.

She flounces in, without taking notice of Holyhead, sweeps her hand over the keys of the instrument with practised skill, trills off a *roulade* that makes the window-glasses ring again, and sinking into an easy chair by the fire, puts her feet upon the fender, disclosing a creased stocking and a slipper down-at-heel, while she

gives vent to a yawn of such capacious energy as betrays an amount of *ennui* by no means complimentary to her companion.

Holyhead looks as if he meditated departure, but did not exactly know how to set about it.

The lady stares at him contemptuously for a minute or so, pulls a bunch of keys and a letter out of her pocket, and flinging the latter in his lap, says in no mellifluous accent, 'Take it. Read me, then, that. What does that mean to say?'

Holyhead recognises the hand of a gentleman with whom he has already had no little correspondence; it is, indeed, from the manager of a great theatre, declining to make any advance on the liberal offer he has tendered the star. As his lordship, with her own consent, had previously closed the bargain for her on these very terms, he is not surprised that an adherence to the contract should be required, and he says as much, pretty decidedly.

'Bah!' returns the lady, with an emphasis on the monosyllable that an Englishwoman could never effect; 'he seems to forget I make my own affair—who saved him last year from bankruptcy? who filled the house night after night, though Coronella sang false through a whole opera, and Tamboretto was as hoarse as a crow? Terms! I make my own terms. What does he mean by terms? Effectively, he is stupid, this man!'

'But my dear Signora,' interposed the nobleman, with more meekness than was his wont, 'I wrote to you in Italy, and you were quite satisfied with the agreement. You yourself bade me accept it on your behalf;

I am compromised in this matter as well as you. I think you ought to consider this. Fair play is a jewel!'

'What signifies that?' retorted the syren; 'I did not then know the offer that Garotte would make me from St. Petersburg, nor the share I might have had in La Scala, if I had not tied myself to this odious country. What a place! what people! what a climate! what infamous coffee! *Enfin*, I shall abandon the whole engagement and go back.'

Holyhead was inexpressibly provoked. There is scheming and there is intrigue behind the imitative scenes of a theatre as within the actual walls of a court. Who knows what amount of trouble, and civility, and subservience, foreign to his real nature, he had lavished to effect the arrangement which he now saw on the point of subversion? Bravoura entertained no mean opinion of her own powers, in fact, it was whispered that the celebrated singer considerably overrated her talents, and the manager was satisfied that he could have got sweeter notes for less money elsewhere. He was willing, however, to oblige Holyhead, nor was he averse to a name that still looked so attractive in the bills; accordingly he concluded a treaty of extreme liberality on his own part, and now he felt he was unfairly used in being required to bid more than the article was worth. Holyhead appreciated his sentiments, and shared his indignation.

'You will not,' said he, controlling his temper with an effort; 'you will think better of it, Signora, if only on my account.'

'*Qui vivra verra*,' answered the lady with a peculiar expression of brow and lip that he well knew; 'I sent for my passport yesterday afternoon.'

She had done the same thing on more than one previous occasion, and had only been induced to stay by great personal entreaty and pecuniary sacrifices. He determined to try firmness for once and abide the result.

'You will be in Paris, then, by Sunday,' said he, pretty calmly; 'will you do two or three little commissions for me?'

She swept a choice porcelain vase filled with flowers, off the table at her elbow, as if by accident, but the gleam in her dark Italian eyes denoted the storm would break ere long.

'I shall only go through Paris from one station to the other. I long so to be back in my dear Italy.'

'Then I won't trouble you,' said Holyhead. 'You must have a great deal to do; I will order my horse and wish you adieu,' he added, moving towards the bell.

The Signora's hand shook visibly, and her deep bosom heaved under her somewhat untidy morning dress. This was not what she wanted at all. She had no more intention of going to Italy than she had of losing her theatrical engagement, but she wanted to be implored to stay, and that her acquiescence should be made a great favour of, and serve as a pretext for the indulgence of a thousand future whims, including a certain fairy carriage with cream-coloured ponies, on which she had set her heart. She took, moreover, a delight in tormenting Holyhead, which none but her own sex can understand. She was under countless obligations to him. He had stood her friend for years,

and she liked him just well enough to enjoy vexing him. She snatched the bell-rope from his hand, and pointing to a chair in her noblest tragedy attitude, with stiffened arm and down-turned wrist,

'Sit down,' she screamed, 'we do not part like this. How dare you use me thus?'

Then the storm burst, in French, in English, in Italian, in woman's universal language, of gasps, and sobs, and tears. She accused him of heartlessness, of injustice, of mistrust; in one breath, of neglecting her interests; in the next, of domineering over her actions. She would never have come to England but for him. He had never influenced her in the least in England or elsewhere, and never should; but it was cruel, it was base, it was infamous, not to advise her now in her need, and assist her in her negotiations. Then she ingeniously put *him* in the wrong, vowing that it was his overrated opinion of her that made her break with her good friend the manager; that it was in accordance with what she believed to be his wishes, she had written to increase her demands; but how could she know what he liked if he never told her, if he never came near her, if he neglected her and left her to do everything for herself? What had she to amuse her? Whom did she ever see? What a life was hers, *triste*, stupefying, *embêtante*. Theatres, diamonds, carriages, pic-nics, what were they to her? It was all Holyhead's fault, and she never could forgive him, not if he was to go down on his knees then and there to beg her pardon, which was the very least he could do.

We need scarcely say that 'Nobs,' as his familiars called him, was a most unlikely person to assume that

humiliating posture. He did nothing of the kind, but he gave in nevertheless. By dint of promises and assurances, and a little scolding, and a good deal of soothing, the Signora was induced for the present to postpone her departure for her native land, under the express stipulation, however, that she should not delay her flight an hour after her engagement was concluded. She longed so for Italy, dear Italy, the very day her theatre closed she should start. How fervently Holyhead hoped she would!

The fact is, he had endured rather too many of these scenes. If constant dropping will wear away a stone, it is no less true that the continual action of the element has, on the other hand, a petrifying tendency on the softer substances, and the fair sex are prone to forget that the most alarming demonstrations, when often repeated, must fail in their object of intimidation. Even the kettle-drum is powerless to rouse the mettle of the equine philosopher on whose shoulders it is usually placed, and Holyhead's sentiments of late in a passage-of-arms with Bravoura had been simply suggestive of weariness while it lasted, and relief when it was over.

Yet had he not strength of mind to free himself at once from the influence exerted by this overbearing and not very attractive lady. A thousand times he resolved nothing would be so easy as to break the imaginary bonds which held him; a thousand times, from mingled motives of good-nature, indolence, and a certain manly consideration of the Signora's *amour-propre*, he paused on the eve of a rupture. He knew he had but to say a

word, and it was done; yet he hesitated, and every day the task became more difficult.

My little playfellow informs me that if you choose to be at the trouble of taking bold Chanticleer from roost in his first sleep, and will bring the astonished bird into a lighted room, you may amuse yourself with the following experiment. Place his beak upon the table, and from that beak draw a line with chalk in any direction you please, the infatuated fowl will not move his head from the spot until the chalk be rubbed out. Doubtless he believes firmly that he is made fast by the nose. My little playfellow cites this instance as an example of the want of wisdom in the gallinaceous tribe, but when my little playfellow gets older he may possibly see parallel cases of helplessness in the unfeathered biped. I think I know of more than one old cock, young cock, or cock of the game, whose tether is imaginary and yet restrictive as the line of white chalk —who lays his foolish beak down in some inconvenient spot, and though everyone else knows him to be as free as air, will not believe he can move an inch from it to save his life. Samson snapped the strongest fetters of the Philistine like withy bands, and yet I have little doubt but that Delilah could have held and bound the champion fast with a thread of her golden hair. Habit and indolence combined, will sometimes weave a tie enduring as the very handcuff of necessity herself.

Holyhead was a widower; like many another such, the failure of his first 'venture,' to use Mr. Weller's appropriate expression, had rather stimulated than damped his hopes of a happier future. In his position,

manly, good-looking, with a large fortune, a peeress's coronet at his disposal, he need have had little trouble in selecting some fair girl from any London ball-room, who would have been willing to share these advantages; but it is almost as difficult to choose from too many as too few. Like the man who looks for a straight stick in the wood, his lordship found himself reaching the boundary of his quest without spying exactly what he wanted, and whilst one was too forward, another too shy, a third somewhat romantic, and a fourth a little affected, he had gradually accustomed himself to the society of Bravoura and her set, till his male friends opined in their discrimination that 'Nobs would never marry at all.'

He had his own ideal, nevertheless, as most men have. Holyhead's was an artless, unaffected, good-humoured girl, more comely than handsome, more frank than *maniérée;* young, fresh, untutored, and altogether a fitter mistress for the old place in Yorkshire, than the town house he let by the season in Grosvenor-square.

Of the same species and the same sex, there could scarcely have been found two individuals so different as the Signora Bravoura, of all the principal theatres in Europe, and Miss Isabella Jones, Verbena Villa, Regent's Park. I do not affirm that Lord Holyhead traced the slightest resemblance between them as he rode slowly away down the long perspective of Portland-place.

Bella goes home rather fluttered and pleased with her morning walk; rather more impatient than usual

of the narrowing circumstances which she foresees must ere long shut her completely out from those brilliant circles of which she has had an occasional glimpse. She is the last young woman on earth to plead guilty to nerves, yet the parrot's screams appear more discordant than usual, and she muffles him, so to speak, with a shawl, covering his cage, much to his disgust, and leaving him with a crust and a lump of sugar, in total darkness, at eleven o'clock in the day. She has but little time, however, to consult her own comforts or inclinations. The Alderman's breakfast must be prepared, and she must herself preside at that meal, supplying his wants with her own hands, and lending a patient ear to his details concerning his gout and other infirmities, glad at any sacrifice to keep him off the distressing subject that is nearest both their hearts. *Podagra* is not an amusing topic for a girl of twenty, nor is it advisable for a patient of threescore to dwell upon the various symptoms of his malady; but when there is a skeleton in the house, even the proprietors are fain to cover it up with whatever rags come most readily to hand; and the nearest relatives had better drivel on in the emptiest of conversation, acting their several parts with studious forbearance, than advert to a topic on which they are sure to disagree. After breakfast, she takes him out for a walk in the brightest part of the day. The Alderman, like most energetic men, is an extremely wilful and obstinate patient, one of those who resolutely decline the pill unless it be sufficiently gilded; and although his doctor tells him walking exercise is indispensable (indis—pensable, observes the sage,

as if he were propounding some new and startling discovery in the theory that air and movement are necessary to the well-being of man), without Bella's arm and Bella's company he could scarcely be induced to step over the threshold. So the good daughter walks out with him day after day, postponing all her own little occupations and amusements to the convenience of papa.

I think the old seldom sufficiently appreciate the forbearance and attentions of the young. Filial duty apart, I think I ought to feel under considerable obligations to my junior when he puts off his pleasures or his excitements to sit and listen to my platitudes, when he consents to sacrifice the poetry of his young life to my unquestionable prose. His society is to *me* like some reviving cordial, a sip of the cup that was once so strong and sparkling, that I drained so greedily, with such a noble thirst. Mine to *him* must, I fear, be at best but an anodyne, a draught that affects him as would 'the drowsy syrups of the East.' He is a willing listener; alas! I fear I ride him on occasion much too hard. I marvel he does not yawn at that story I have told him so often about Brummel and the Brighton coach. I wonder whether he really believes in my short-tailed grey horse, or the retriever that was drowned the day we heard of Waterloo, or my famous 'innings' at St. Alban's off Catapult's bowling, when the last of the Cæsars was a boy? Does he consider me a deliberate and circumstantial liar, or only a fond foolish old man, whose memory runs away with him? At least he is patient under the infliction, kind, gentle, and considerate; at least I owe him thanks for riveting one of those links

which are parting so fast between myself and the world that is passing away from me. When he goes back to his horse, or his cricket, or his sweetheart, he will not, I think, be the less lighthearted, or the less successful, that he has smoothed a few yards of the old man's down-hill path towards his grave.

Rusticus expectat dum defluit amnis. The crossing of Oxford-street, when they extend their walk so far, is always to Bella a subject of grave and nervous responsibility. The Alderman's infirmity, and his obstinacy in ignoring it, render him a likely object to become the victim of reckless driving; and his daughter, like the Roman rustic who pauses till the river shall have flowed by, that he may cross over dry-shod, is fain to wait many a weary minute ere she dare venture her charge in the stream of carriages, omnibuses, and cabs, which seem to roll on in a continuous and eternal tide. One of the latter passes close to father and daughter as they stand on the footway. Its inmate stops the driver with unusual vehemence, but he has shaken both father and daughter by the hand, and greeted them in the kindly voice they have never forgotten, ere either recognises in that worn, haggard face, with its bronzed skin and large beard, the features of their dandy friend, Gilbert Orme. He is indeed much altered; he has acquired that restless, *anxious* look which so soon stamps age on the countenance; and had it not been for the full sweet tones, pleasing and musical as ever, even Bella would have failed to recognise him.

She blushed, however, as she did so; Bella's blushes were easily forthcoming when she was interested; and, rather to her own surprise, she asked him news of

John Gordon, in the very first sentence. I have my own opinion that while she did so, Miss Jones found out something she had never suspected before.

'He came to town with me this morning,' answered Gilbert, 'and has only gone to his own lodgings to dress in decent clothes. He will be at the Villa before you can get back.'

There was something in his tone that struck both his listeners, although each was naturally preoccupied with the intelligence it conveyed. Bella's heart beat fast as she thought she was so soon to see John Gordon, yet was she a little surprised it did not beat faster; and I question if she looked forward to the interview with half the anxiety of her father.

Nevertheless, the first thought of the kind-hearted old man was for his young friend—

'You look ill, Orme,' said he, anxiously, 'very ill. Have you kept clear of these fevers? Is there anything the matter?'

Gilbert laughed, but it struck even Bella there was something very forced and hollow in his laugh.

'Never was better!' he answered, in a loud voice that arrested the attention of the passers-by. 'I need not ask after *you*, or Gertrude, or my mother, I suppose they are all well, I suppose I shall see them by and bye.'

'Are you not going there now?' said Bella, more than ever struck with his strange look, and wondering the while whether John Gordon had reached the Villa, and would wait till they returned from their walk.

'No,' he answered, speaking through his set teeth,

like a man in pain; 'I have something to do first. I cannot stay. I am glad to have seen you. I must not wait any longer, good bye. Drive on,' he added, to the cabman, 'and make haste, there's a good fellow;' muttering as he sank back into the cab, 'You will get there soon enough; you will get there soon enough. What have I done to deserve this punishment?'

Bella and her father hastened homewards to the Regent's Park; on their way they encountered Lord Holyhead once again; and Bella's dark eyes brightened considerably as she smiled her acknowledgments of his lordship's very marked and deferential salute. She tripped on with a lighter step than usual after that courtesy, chatting gaily with her father; and her coming interview with the returning traveller seemed to grow less and less formidable every minute. A year ago she could not have faced John Gordon half so coolly after an absence of eight-and-forty hours. Do not blame her therefore. We cannot all be mirrors of constancy and fidelity. In a world of change like ours, it is surely better to be less immutable than impressionable, to be more alive to the influence of the present than the past. It may be heresy in love, but it is sound common sense nevertheless in common life. Shall everything around you change? the trees, the climate, the surface of the country? Shall you yourself, as your doctor tells you, lose your own corporeal identity by the process of waste and supply once in every seven years, and shall your sentiments and affections, madam, undergo no corresponding muta-

tions? Forbid it all the prescriptive rights and privileges of womanhood! Remember his Seneschal's sage advice to the noble Moringer—

> Seven twelvemonths, did I say?
> I'll pledge me for no lady's faith
> Beyond the seventh fair day!

In a Hansom cab, rattling and bounding at a gallop towards the Edgeware-road, is one who had better have changed like the veriest dog-vane, veering at every breath to every point, than sit as he does now, with closed jaw, and fixed eye, and cold clenched hands, nerving himself like one who is about to meet his fate, and muttering below his breath, 'You will get there soon enough! You will get there soon enough!'

CHAPTER XXXIII.

'NEVER AGAIN.'

FOR a certain space of time, how long or how short they never afterwards distinctly remembered, neither spoke more than a few common-place words of courteous greeting. It needed no explanation to tell Gilbert that Mrs. Latimer knew all; that sad wistful face was more eloquent than the wildest exclamations; the resigned hopelessness of her bearing showed more of suffering than would a thousand complaints. She had expected him all day. Well she knew that he would hurry to her the very instant he arrived in London; and her unselfish heart ached more painfully for his misery than her own. She had desired that he might be admitted; she had resolved to grant him this one interview, to use her gentle influence as far as possible in softening the blow that was inevitable; and then, never to see him again. It was almost a relief to perceive by the expression of *his* face that he must have made the same discovery as herself: it lightened her task ever such a little. How different from the meeting she had anticipated twenty-four hours ago! when she was to have given him up voluntarily with such ready generosity. Was it easier to give him up

now, when the impassable gulf yawned between them? Was the treasure less valuable because she must never so much as think of it again?

She was the first to speak. Her heart was sore to see his altered looks, his pale worn face, on which grief and anxiety had set the marks as of physical pain. She remembered him so well in the prime of health and happiness and manly vigour. What a contrast now! She could scarce keep back her tears.

'You are ill?' she said, and her voice shook; while from an impulse she could not resist, she took his hand. 'You look wretchedly. You are completely broken down. Oh! Gilbert, Gilbert, for my sake do not give way like this!'

It was too much. His heart was full; and even a man's pride was insufficient to control his weakness as he bent over the dear hand he had hoped to make his own. She had to find courage and strength for both. Who can tell what it cost her? Who can calculate the struggle that tore that fond true heart? It is set down in a book ruled with no earthly lines, and some day an angel will add it up, and place the score exulting on the credit side.

She broke from him, and unlocked her writing-desk. Taking out her husband's letter, she put it in Gilbert's hand without a word, nor once took her eyes off his face till he had read it through, refolded it, and returned it to her with the same silent gravity. There was neither astonishment, nor anger, nor reproach on his countenance, nothing but the sad hopeless sorrow that cut her to the soul. She wished he would blame her, argue with her, quarrel with her, anything rather

than this dumb, piteous resignation. Once more, and, as it were, to break the spell, she forced herself to speak.

'You know all now,' she said. 'We have been the victims of a cruel deception; and yet perhaps he could not help it. Believe me, Mr. Orme, I have not injured you willingly. There is but one path before us. We must never meet again.'

He raised his head stiffly. Those low grave tones were most unlike Gilbert's voice.

'Be it so,' he replied. 'At least I am consoled to see you can bear it so cheerfully. At least I am glad to be the only sufferer.'

They were cruel words, and she felt them so; but she knew that men are unjust in proportion to the strength of their affections; and she could not bear to think that he should go away and never do her justice, never know the cost of her burnt-offering, purified by a fire that reduced to ashes the altar on which it was kindled.

'Do not say so,' she answered, her eyes filling fast with tears. 'Do not believe I am utterly without feeling, without heart. Do you think I can take a sponge at will and wipe out the past, as you wipe off the figures from a child's slate? Do you think I can forget last year, with its changes, and its misgivings, and its surprise of unspeakable happiness? Do not make my duty too difficult for me to perform —do not make my burden too heavy for me to bear— do not force me to confess that my misery is more hopeless, my punishment heavier and more enduring than your own.'

His face cleared and brightened in a moment. A

beam of hope seemed to play on it once more. Something in Ada's tone, that spoke of human longing and vain natural regret, seemed to call him, as it were, to the rescue. He was a man, and he argued like a man, pressing into his service all the considerations of sophistry, expediency, and precedent which might at least, he thought, persuade, if they were powerless to convince. He rose from his chair, and his whole exterior seemed to glow and change, whilst the full tones of the kindly voice smote sweetly, as of old, upon her ear. With all the impassioned energy of a man who is pleading for life, and more than life, he urged upon her every argument that love could suggest to fly at once with him, and be his own for ever. He pleaded his faith, his truth, his fond obedience, above all, his altered condition now, and his future destruction if deprived of her. He was ready to leave England with her that minute—to change his name—to accompany her to the remotest corner of the earth, and there devote every hour of his life to her service. They would be so contented, so happy. With a fine climate and a beautiful country, and their own society, all the world to each other, life would be a rapturous dream. He drew such a picture of their future as dazzled even his own mental vision. Gilbert was never deficient in eloquence; and the advocate's own being was indeed wrapped up in his cause. Then he asked indignantly what it was, this obstacle, that stood in the way of more than earthly happiness? A right granted without consideration, and repudiated by the possessor's own deliberate act; an alliance never sanctioned by love, and dissolved by mutual consent of the contractors.

Was this imaginary difficulty to embitter the whole future lives of two guiltless persons? Was a superstitious adherence to a vow made under mistaken conditions, and afterwards broken on the one part, to debar her for ever from the inheritance of every child of clay? —the sunshine of the soul that gladdens all alike, rich and poor, grand and lowly—that gives a zest to the beggar's coarsest food, and kindles a glow upon the peasant's fireless hearth? Was *he* to be the joint sufferer: he who had loved her as a thousand Latimers could never have done, to whom in her beauty she was the light of his life, the very air he breathed?

'Ada, Ada! you are mine in the sight of heaven. Will you sacrifice me to *him?*'

Since our Mother Eve was fain to listen to the whispers of the serpent, it seems woman's lot to be tempted, woman's lot to be in all cases the besieged and the assailed.—Woe to her if she be defeated!—woe to her if she be surprised by a *coup-de-main*, or compelled to surrender at discretion! In either case, whilst the conqueror flings abroad his banner and trumpets forth his victory with all the honours of war, the vanquished must be enslaved, reviled, and humbled to the very dust. *Væ victis!* is the battle-cry of less unpolished savages than Brennus, of none more than the gentler sex themselves. I wonder on what principle of justice is founded the award that the less erring of two culprits should bear the whole punishment of their joint crime? I wonder in what page of the gospel I shall find authority for the conclusion, that the same offence is in man a venial folly, in woman an unpardonable sin? Is it brave and generous to trample down the weak and truckle to the strong?

Is it the Teacher's will that his disciples should be the first to 'break the bruised reed and quench the smoking flax?' If so, then society as at present constituted is indeed established on a noble and Christian-like basis!

Tempted she was indeed, and who can tell how sorely? Yet did Ada come out of the furnace pure and radiant as an angel of light. It was hard to see him pleading there so eagerly, hard to know what must be the result of his failure in the one dear hope of his life, hardest of all to stifle the voice that cried for him so loudly in her own breast. Ada, too, was not deficient in imagination. She could picture to herself—oh, far too vividly—the happiness of a lot on which she must not even dare to think; could appreciate with a thrill that was not altogether painful the intense devotion that scrupled not for an instant to leave country and friends and kindred, and all for her sake; that would willingly and thankfully lose everything else so it gained but her. Men did not usually love like this. It *was* something to have found the treasure; alas, that it had been won only to be given up! *Her* visions, too, had been of a golden future, rich in all the blessings of domestic happiness and love; a future that to a woman—and such a woman as Ada—was a very type of heaven upon earth. Now that it was *impossible* she felt for the first time how she had cherished and leant upon this future—how she had made it the goal and the object of every thought and every action—how it had indeed become a part of her very existence, without which the life before her was a weary and barren waste.

Then it seemed so easy to make herself and him happy. What was the sacrifice of character and repu-

tation and earthly honour? Nothing for *his* sake. Nay it would be a pleasure to prove to him that she too could give up all for one she loved. The opportunity was present, the cage was open; it seemed so easy to be free—so easy but for one consideration.

'Gilbert,' she said, and the loving look she bent upon him was pure from all earthly feeling, 'Gilbert, you have often told me that my happiness was dearer to you than your own; that you were capable of any effort, any sacrifice, for my welfare. It was my pride and pleasure to believe this, to know that you were different from others, to feel that I could trust you and depend upon you to the last. The time has come to put you to the proof. There is right, Gilbert, and there is wrong. Would you ask me to turn out of the path that leads to Heaven even for *your* sake? Would you wish to see me lost body and soul? Oh, I know you better than that. You are generous and chivalrous and good. Assist me in my task, hard though it be. Join me in the painful effort. I need never then be ashamed of the past. Do not deprive me of my only consolation, but let me carry with me that memory pure and unsullied into another world.'

He could almost have consented then never to see her more. She had enlisted all his better feelings in the cause. Was she not worthy of any sacrifice, though it were his life's happiness, as she stood there so pure, so sorrowing, so loveable—the soft cheek so pale and wan, the tears gathering fast in those deep fond eyes? Had she been less beautiful she might have conquered. But no, he *could* not give her up—could not voluntarily resign her to another, his type of all that was most

enslaving and attractive, his very ideal of womanly perfection both in body and mind. Right or wrong, if man could do it, he would win her still. He could not stand upon the heights that she had reached, nor breathe so pure an air as that refined exalted nature. There was an earthly leavening in his devotion, deep and absorbing though it was—a drop in the cup of his affection which, like some cunning poison, sweetened while it strengthened the draught. Banishment from her presence was too severe a sentence; he could not bear it and live—he said so.

But she was firm. She who knew the danger so well, whose eyes were not blinded by passion or self-interest, though she had loved him entirely, though her future life promised to be even sadder and lonelier than his own. She could do right, though hers appeared far the harder task of the two. We call them the weaker sex; we mock their frailties, their indecision, their inconstancy and love of change; yet I have known women bear suffering both of body and mind without wincing, from which a strong man has shrunk and turned away aghast.

'It must not be,' she said, softly, but decidedly. 'This is our last meeting upon earth. It is hard to say farewell. Gilbert, if it will make you happier, I will even pray that you may forget me.'

He was angry, maddened, desperate.

'You have never loved me,' he exclaimed, wildly, 'if you can say such things to me now. You are like all other women, and I was an idiot to suppose you different. So long as everything went on smoothly, while there was little to lose and much to gain, so long was I

in high favour, and Mrs. Latimer saw nothing to be ashamed of in the conquest of Gilbert Orme; but directly there comes a difficulty, directly she on her side has something to give up, something to undergo, oh! then it is quite another thing, and the poor fool who cannot change his affections as a lady does her dress, must suffer for his infatuation during the rest of his life. Well, I thank you for the lesson, Mrs. Latimer. I am not the first man, I conclude, by a good many, who has had to learn it; though it has not been taught in the kindest manner, I am the less likely to forget it. I shall not fall into the same mistake again, you may be sure. Oh! I am likely to be a wise, and a good, and a happy man hereafter!'

He spoke in strong bitter irony; hurt, angry, and self-torturing. She could not answer him for sobbing, and he went on, now softening at her distress, now lashing himself once more into cruelty.

'If I might but live near you, and see you sometimes; if I might watch over you, Ada, and hear from you, and be sure of your welfare. I would even be satisfied that you should never hold communication with me so long as you were well and happy, on condition that I might come to you and aid you in sickness or distress. But no, no, you shake your head, you deny me even a kind word, a pitying look. False, heartless, ungrateful! you never cared for me, and I will crush and annihilate every feeling I ever had for you as I trample this wretched flower under my foot!'

While he spoke, he took a sprig of geranium from a stand on the table, and ground it with a curse be-

neath his heel. Then, without another word or look, turned abruptly to the door, and left the apartment.

With fixed eyes and parted lips, Ada stretched out her arms towards his receding figure. She tried to speak, but her voice was gone. Like the vague noises of a dream, she heard his footsteps die away upon the stair, the closing of the street door, and the wheels of the cab which had been waiting for him clattering away up the street. Then for the first time she realized her desolation. She felt the agony she had undergone, and knew the extent and the hopelessness of her loss. Never to see him again! neither to-day, nor to-morrow, nor next month, nor through all the weary years they both might live: never to hear his voice, nor see his handwriting, nor know aught of him, save through careless indifferent third persons. Her dearest hope to be that he might forget her, that he might belong exclusively to another, and love that fortunate woman as well as he had loved her. No! she could not quite bring herself to that, and yet how selfish to wish it otherwise. And half-an-hour ago her destiny was in her own power! Had she so willed it, she might have been his own all her life. It was a cruel reflection, and yet had it to be done again, Ada thought she would again have found strength for what she considered the Right.

Nevertheless, she picked up the poor flower he had crushed with such brutal harshness, and hid it away sadly and tenderly in her bosom.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE THORN IN THE FLESH.

IT is a bright spring afternoon in the first flush of the London season. The old story has begun over again with fresh hopes, fresh schemes, a few fresh faces—the old story of dining and driving and dressing, and pushing on with calm polite energy that never relaxes, as though it had some definite object for its goal. There are indeed a few blanks amongst the rank and file of the *élite*. The pale visitor who knocks at the door of lowly hut and regal palace, alike regardless of the hall-porter's 'not-at-home' and the peasant-mother's imploring cry, has taken care of that. Certain Amphitryons will bow blandly to their guests no more; a joker or two has exchanged his thoughtless existence for something perhaps a little more like real earnest; Timon of Athens has left a hatchment on his four-storied house, and his affairs in a state of hopeless confusion; yet the ball goes round much the same. A few words of languid pity comprise Timon's epitaph. 'The fool of a doctor never bled him. How well his horses sold at Tattersall's; and who has got his cook?' His very cab-horse stands opposite to them now as they sit in the bay-window of their club; but Landless, Flippant, and the like have

already paid tribute to his memory, as recorded above, and are talking of something else.

Charley Wing has succeeded to a fortune. Charley Wing has become the unexpected possessor of docks in Liverpool, and acres in Buckinghamshire, and mines in Cornwall, and money in the funds. No longer a gay *condottiere* living from hand to mouth, looking perpetually over his shoulder for somebody who 'wants' him, reduced to his last shifts to obtain credit for his gloves, Charley Wing has become a man of substance—a landholder, a capitalist. The change has had its usual effect. From a light-hearted, open-handed 'good-for-nothing,' he has become a morose, close-fisted curmudgeon. The *ci-devant* dandy walks about now with thick soles and a cotton umbrella. Landless asked him last week to lend him a 'pony.'

'Only a pony, I give you my honour,' said that experienced borrower, in a tone of injured feeling, 'and he has never spoken to me since, besides refusing point-blank. The infernal screw!'

The pony would have been useful to Landless, who owes money to everybody that will trust him. A year ago, if Charley Wing by rare accident had a five-pound note in his pocket, it was at the service of the first person who asked for it. The evergreen Flippant, settling his neckcloth and feeling the padding of his coat, opines that 'it's all up with a fellow when he gets into more than ten thousand a year,' and his auditors, having applauded Flippant's remark, as is their custom, the latter struts away with the happy persuasion that he has perpetrated a jest. Holyhead joins the group, and nods to a man in the street who walks moodily by, with his

eyes fixed on the pavement, and who takes no notice of the salute nor of his friends in the window.

''Gad,' says Landless, 'there's a fellow that, according to Flippant, must have come in for a pot of money. It's all up with Orme since he went to that queer Australian climate. I never saw a man so changed in my life. He was never likely to set the Thames on fire; but still he used to be a cheery, amusing bird enough, and now you can't get a word out of him, good or bad. You know him, Holyhead, better than anybody—what's the matter with him? Is it lungs or liver, or lawsuits, or what?'

'How d'ye mean, he can't set the Thames on fire?' interrupted Holyhead, rising freely, as was his wont, in defence of an absent friend. 'There's not a fellow of our own set's got better brains than Orme. If he turned his mind to it, I would back him to write a book, hanged if I wouldn't' ('Nobs' always avowed that he considered the production of a book, good or bad, as the *ne plus ultra* of mental ability). 'He's only seedy after a sea-voyage, that's all. So would you be, Landless, if that great stomach of yours was turned inside out without intermission for twelve or fourteen weeks. He'll be all right after the Derby. A fellow never feels as if he was thoroughly at home again till he has seen a Derby, you know.'

Holyhead did not think exactly as he spoke. He, too, had not failed to remark the visible alteration in his friend's looks and manner; had been hurt to observe that his own society, once so welcome, was now shunned as much as possible, and had indeed given many an anxious thought to the state of Orme's mind and

spirits; but he was too stanch and judicious a friend to make Gilbert's feelings the topic of conversation in a club, and was not sorry moreover to 'pooh-pooh' any suggestions of Landless, whom in his heart he considered a 'gossiping old fool!'

That worthy, however, had not done with him yet. He laid his cane impressively on Holyhead's shoulder, and lowered his voice to a confidential whisper.

'Something wrong,' said he, with a shake of his head. 'Depend upon it, my dear fellow, there's a screw loose somewhere. Just like his poor father. I remember him well, though he was rather before my time, you know. He went just in the same way—gave up hunting and society and all that; took to living quite by himself; grew perfectly childish, I've been told; and at last died *very* suddenly in his arm-chair. They hushed it all up, I remember; but everybody down there was persuaded he had made away with himself. It's in the blood, depend upon it—in the blood. I know what these things are, and I should never be surprised at anything in *that* family.'

'Nonsense,' retorted Holyhead, fairly provoked, and in another minute he was galloping off in the direction of the Park to get rid of his misgivings, if possible, by rapid motion; whilst Landless, taking up the evening paper, fell to its perusal with the calm satisfaction of one who has succeeded in making his neighbour thoroughly uncomfortable.

It required indeed no great perception to observe a change in the demeanour of Gilbert Orme; for a few weeks after his return he had disappeared altogether, and even his most intimate friends never knew how

or where those weeks of wild passionate sorrow had been spent. From my own knowledge of his character, I incline to think he remained in London during that dreary period. There are some spirits that find relief from suffering in restlessness, in perpetual motion, and continuous excitement. For these there are strong hopes of recovery. They wear out body and mind with the violence and rapidity of their motions till nature will be denied no longer, and exhaustion forces on them the anodyne of rest. It is grievous to wake to consciousness once more, and the treatment must in all probability be repeated over and over again till it produces its effect. Each fresh paroxysm becomes less painful, each lull of oblivion deeper than its predecessor. Wave after wave of self-consuming sorrow succeeds at long intervals, and the troubled ocean subsides into a cold sad calm at last. Others, again, seem to be stunned and crushed by the blow they have sustained. They gaze wildly around, apparently incapable of an effort for their own preservation. Dull and stupefied, they take no note of anything but the fatality that has overtaken them. Perhaps with touching helplessness they hover aimlessly about the spot where the wreck went to pieces when she came ashore. They would hide themselves and their woes from their fellowmen; they want no sympathy, no assistance; they only ask to be left unnoticed and alone. For such there is little hope. The wild animal carries his wound home to the solitude of his den, but he reaches it only to die.

Those few weeks were a blank in Gilbert's life. It is needless to say how he repented of his bitter words and violent reproaches in his last interview with Ada. How

twenty-four hours had not elapsed ere he was willing to submit to anything, however humiliating, only to see her again. How he went back the following day to her house at the earliest hour decency would permit, and found that she was gone.

'Gone out of town,' the maid said, 'and given up her lodgings, and left no address. She was quite sure there was no address. Mrs. Latimer went away last night.'

Every word struck cold as ice to his heart. He went straight to his mother's. In the drawing-room was an open note to Gertrude in Ada's handwriting. The former lady was not yet dressed. It had evidently arrived the evening before, and been thrown carelessly aside after perusal. It contained only a few lines, stating that the writer was 'summoned into the country unexpectedly, and should be unable to attend her ladyship any more.' He crushed it up in his hand with a curse, and then he pressed it to his lips tenderly and with a ghastly smile. How many fond happy tears in former days had dropped on those delicate characters, and now it seemed a cruel mockery that they should record his sentence. He waited to see no one, but rushed incontinently from the house, and it was several weeks ere Lady Olivia or Lady Gertrude or any of them heard of him again.

Ada had indeed sought safety in flight. Enclosing a few hurried lines to her husband's agents, she informed them of her projected departure, and her intention of writing to them again with her new address, which she insisted must be communicated to no one but Mr. Latimer on his arrival.

From the uncertainty of his movements, she was spared the trial of having to answer her husband's letter. She was stern and pitiless. With that dogged resolution which sustains women in an effort of self-sacrifice, she stifled all the softer and kindlier feelings of her nature, forcing herself into what she deemed the performance of her duty with the savage energy of despair. And she thought, poor Ada! that she could sustain this high-wrought part—that her own heart would not soon smite her too keenly on his behalf whom she knew to be in sadness and loneliness and desolation—that the reaction would not come and leave her weaker, fonder, more helpless, more miserable than before.

However, she went out of town, and left no trace by which he could follow her or obtain information of her whereabout; and after a time Gilbert reappeared on that stage on which the characters wear their motley with such appropriate gestures, on which the performers are so well 'up' in their respective parts.

London, particularly in the season, is no place for the indulgence of solitary grief. A man cannot well sulk or mope by himself whose breakfast-table is covered with cards and invitations, whose leisure is continually broken in upon by acquaintances calling themselves friends, and who have a thousand schemes of pleasure and pastime, of which they have elected him a principal partaker. He allows himself to be carried away by the tide, and joins in amusements for which he has no zest from sheer want of energy to make head against the flood.

I am not sure but that the pale convive sitting at

the board, clad in brave apparel, and crowned with the festive wreath, is not a drearier sight, as he quaffs his wine with ghastly smiles, than the cowering wretch who shrinks from his fellows in honest helplessness, neither afraid to bemoan his sorrow nor ashamed to confess his sufferings. As usual, the braver nature must take the deepest wounds the while it carries the highest crest, and the serge jerkin is opened at once to dress scars that must stiffen uncared for beneath a cloth of gold.

Gilbert could not refuse to acknowledge his acquaintances, because he no longer took the slightest interest in them and their doings, nor to dine with his former associates simply because he was himself restless and unhappy. Insensibly he glided into something of his previous life, kept the same hours, frequented the same clubs, cut off his beard, dressed like other men of his age, and went through the usual routine of what is termed 'good society.' But the zest was gone from everything he did—there was the bitterness of gall in the cup, quaff it as bravely as he might, a sting in every pleasure rankling and probing to his heart's core. I heard a lad complaining once to a surgeon that he had run a thorn deep into his hand, and whenever he moved, whatever he touched, he was reminded of its presence by the pain. 'Cut it out,' was the sage and medical advice given. 'Oh, doctor,' said the boy, 'it would hurt more to cut it out than to bear it as it is!' I have often thought of my young friend and his philosophy, not differing entirely from Hamlet's. How many of us have a thorn that we would fain be rid of, and yet that we go on enduring, afraid to face the pain

of eradication. How many a burden would be thrown off, how many a chain broken, how many a complaint spared, could we but bring ourselves to contemplate unshrinkingly the possibility of 'cutting it out.' Every day it works deeper and deeper, burrowing through the flesh to incorporate itself with the bone—every day the difficulty of extraction becomes greater—more and more we wince from the probe. At last, we resign ourselves helplessly to our pain. Habit is second nature—it becomes part and parcel of ourselves. Perhaps the boy was right, after all, and 'it would hurt more to cut it out than to bear it as it is!'

I do not think that at this time Gilbert was an agreeable companion. He took to drinking deeply, not with the jovial *abandon* that glosses over, if it cannot excuse, that vice, but with a morose determination anything but characteristic of a *bon camarade*. After these bouts he would go into society with a flushed brow and haggard eyes, to stand in silence contemplating the scene with indifference, or to whisper a few sardonic remarks to his next neighbour, who, if of the fair sex, was pretty sure to approve of his observations. The best and kindliest of women are not proof against well-directed satire aimed at their friends. His potations seemed to have no effect upon his demeanour, certainly not to raise his spirits—the latter indeed were observed to sink lower and lower with the waning decanters. Gilbert seldom laughed now; when he did, those who heard his merriment cared little to have it repeated. It was not a healthy ebullition—not the least like a child's mirth. Altogether, he was strangely altered. Some of the ladies thought him improved,

but these were chiefly dames who found themselves, to use their own jargon, considerably *blasées*, and who would have greeted Mephistopheles himself in a white neckcloth with the utmost cordiality if he promised to be different from the people they usually met. Mrs. Montpellier was quite concerned about him. She stood for an hour in a corner of the blue drawing-room at Ormolu House talking to Holyhead confidentially of his friend, regardless of the construction charitable observers might put on this long conversation.

'Get him out of London, I entreat you,' said she, with kindly sympathy melting in her dark eyes. 'Get him to Bath, or Brighton, or abroad to drink the waters, or anywhere. I tell you he's killing himself here. Look at him! did you ever see anybody so altered? What are all his friends about? Dear! how I wish I was his mother! I should march him off with me down into the country, and nurse him till he got well. You know what a life he is leading. You men know everything, only you all screen one another. Up all night, and dissipating and gambling, I hear; and worse than all, losing his health and his looks day by day. And he used to be such a dear, bright, fresh-coloured boy. Now promise me, *promise* me, Lord Holyhead, that you'll try and do something to save him before it is too late!'

Good-hearted Holyhead strove to calm Mrs. Montpellier's anxieties, assuring her that they were entirely without foundation, that Gilbert's altered looks were but the effect of climate, and that his late hours and extravagances were but bad habits contracted in the colonies, which he would soon lose again now that he

had returned to his former associates; but he succeeded neither in reassuring the lady nor himself. Mrs. Montpellier shook her glossy black head, vowing she would face the whole Visigoth set, and attack Lady Olivia herself on behalf of her son, rather than let things go on as they were; whilst Holyhead, who had his own reasons for knowing the truth of these reports about Orme's wild caprices and his late losses at play, determined to expostulate with him forthwith as to the imprudence and folly of the way in which he was going on.

He watched his opportunity accordingly, and regardless of entreating glances cast at him from many a shawled beauty and hooded chaperone, who wanted him to call up their carriages, he followed Gilbert down the steps of Ormolu House as the latter emerged with the obvious intention of departing alone and on foot; and taking his arm *nolens volens*, expressed his determination of walking home with him for a quiet chat. It is no easy matter to commence taking even the most intimate friend to task concerning his habits, demeanour, and general conduct, but Holyhead was not a man to beat about the bush when he knew where the game lay; and lighting a cigar, he plunged at once without hesitation *in medias res*.

'Gilbert,' said the peer, emitting the smoke from his mouth in short sharp puffs, as was his custom when peculiarly energetic, 'they tell me you are playing the devil. I'm the oldest friend you have, you know, and I don't care a straw whether I offend you or not. You're getting into the worst set in London. I haven't seen you at a respectable house till to-night

for a week. You've lost no end of money—more than even *you* can afford—within the last few days; and everybody is talking about your altered manner and strange ways. One by one you're losing every friend you ever had. You must take a pull, old fellow, you must indeed. Hang it! You're not a fool, though you're behaving like one. You can't go on so.'

'What do you wish me to do?' said Gilbert, in such a quiet, hopeless tone as disappointed his friend sadly. Holyhead had almost wished he would quarrel with him, pull him up for his interference, give him an opportunity of saying a host of sharp things, and of rescuing his friend, so to speak, with the strong hand from himself; but this gentle unquestioning acquiescence disarmed the peer completely, upset his whole mode of attack, and confused all his operations.

'Do?' repeated he; 'why, come with me to Germany, or Switzerland, or Norway, or anywhere you like. Get out of London, and into fresh air and a quiet life. I'll go with you to-morrow, if you'll only say the word, and pitch every engagement I have to the devil. Hang it! old fellow, you're the dearest friend I have, or I wouldn't speak to you as I do.'

'You are a kind, good fellow,' answered Gilbert, and again the utter hopelessness of his tone sank into his friend's heart. 'But what is the use?—what is the use?' He repeated the words vacantly, and, as it seemed, unconsciously.

Holyhead was at a nonplus. There was something in all this beyond his simple skill to fathom or to set right. He stopped beneath a gaslight and peered anxiously into his companion's face. There was that

in it which he could not rightly understand. Everybody who knew 'Nobs' said that his heart was in the right place. Something like a tear glistened on his shaggy cheek as he grasped his friend's arm once more, and spoke in a softened and broken voice.

'Gilbert, I never had a brother, but I could not have loved fifty brothers as well as I do you. There's something wrong, very wrong, I can see plainly. Trust me. Tell me what it is. I don't care what you've done. I'll stand by you through thick and thin. Only trust me. Only tell me what I can do for you.'

The other burst out laughing. Orme's temper was so variable now, you never knew whether he would be grave or gay for five minutes together.

'You're quite in the blues to-night, Nobs,' said he, with harsh, jeering merriment. 'What the devil should I have to confess worse than the rest of us? You don't think I've robbed a church, do you? or that if I had, I should be sorry for it? Cheer up, old fellow; every man for himself, you know. When I want you, I'll come to you. Don't be offended; you mean well, I'm sure, but you don't make allowances for a fellow like me—a fellow that cares for nobody, and has nobody to care for him. It's a jolly life—*very*. You can't think how happy I am sometimes. Here we are at my door. Will you come in and drink brandy? or go quietly home to bed? You won't? Well, then, I must take your allowance and my own too. There's nothing like it. "*Il segreto per esser felice*," you know.' And he trolled out the famous drinking-song from *Lucretia Borgia* in rich, manly tones, scarcely yet impaired by his failing health.

Holyhead bade him 'Good-night,' with a sad, wistful countenance, and betook himself to his own bachelor home at a far slower pace than ordinary, shaking his head moodily at intervals as he strode along the streets. The peer was at his wits' end—not a long distance, certainly—yet had he never arrived so obviously at that *terminus* before. As he drew his latch-key from his pocket, he startled the policeman on duty by the energy with which he gave vent to this remarkable expression—

'*Pounded*, by Jupiter! There *must* be a woman at the bottom of it!'

And Gilbert drank brandy as he had threatened; aye, and a darker fluid than brandy, poured drop by drop from a phial—a fluid without which he could now never know a moment's composure or repose—and then he sallied forth again, with many a bitter laugh at his own weakness, and crossed the Edgeware-road, and flitted to and fro about a certain dreary street, as they say the miser's ghost flits aimlessly about the spot which concealed his buried treasure long ago.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A FELLOW FEELING.

THE only person in whom Gilbert seemed to confide, or in whose society at this period he seemed to take the slightest pleasure, was his cousin, Lady Gertrude. There might have been some secret sympathy between these two; for Gertrude also, with no obvious cause for uneasiness, was not happy. It may appear strange that a young lady possessed of her advantages, both of person and position, rejoicing, moreover, in a good constitution and a fortune of thirty thousand pounds, should have a care or an annoyance beyond the folds of her dress and the circumference of her crinoline; but pleasures and sorrows are pretty equally distributed amongst all classes in this world of ours, and the peer's daughter is no more free from the latter than the peasant lass is debarred from the former of these necessities of existence. When the princess meets the milkmaid in the fairy-tale, and makes the latter the confidante of her woes, do we not find that her little world of hopes, and fears, and jealousies, and anxieties, is very like that of her low-born companion? Nay, that Dolly's very often is the most enviable lot of the two? Though she have to rise at daybreak, and milk

the cows on a misty morning, though she break her fast on brown bread, and wear a coarse but not unbecoming petticoat, she enjoys several advantages that are not commanded by her noble friend in brocade. Dolly can come and go unquestioned, if not unnoticed, to and from her tryst beneath the hawthorn tree. Dolly's gambols at fair and market are, if not uncensured, at least unchallenged by her gossiping comrades. Free-handed Dolly can box her swain's ears for attempting a kiss, or offer her red lips to that smacking salute without fear of discovery; and may jig it all Saturday night at a merry-making with Hodge if she will, and find her freedom unimpaired by her activity on Sunday morning. But precious Perdita must do none of these things. Perdita must not go across the threshold of the palace unattended. Perdita must by no means over-heat her pretty self with exercise, or wet her tiny feet in the morning dew. Above all things, Perdita must be careful of every look or sign she casts amongst the household, more particularly that portion of it which wears doublet and hose. Perdita may dance a minuet with the Grand Falconer, a venerable nobleman, feathered and hooded, and beaked, like one of his own hawks; but she must not so much as speak to the handsome equerries, or look at the roguish pages; and as for that beautiful young prince to whom she has been betrothed unseen, and with whose portrait she has fallen in love, etiquette forbids poor Perdita to mention his name, or inquire about his movements, or even to seem aware of the happiness for which she is destined. Despite of the brocade and the confectionery, the gilded

chambers and royal coaches, the silks and satins, and diamond ear-rings and glass slippers, I cannot but think that I would rather be Dolly the milkmaid, than Perdita the princess.

Now, although no young person in London succeeded in getting her own way more effectually than did Lady Gertrude, there was, so to speak, a rose-leaf rumpled amongst all her mattresses, which for the present destroyed her comfort and disturbed her repose.

It is perhaps in my reader's remembrance, that on a certain occasion during the previous year a sufficiently cavalier farewell was taken of an old friend in Portland-place, bound for a longer voyage than is usual with the denizens of that locality; but I cannot expect my reader to be intuitively aware how that careless greeting afterwards rankled in the minds of the two individuals concerned. Above all, how the lady brooded over it month after month with ever increasing remorse; how she would have given anything she possessed to recall it; how she had resolved to make amends for it, and do away with the recollection of it on the first opportunity; and how, when the opportunity arrived, and John Gordon, swarthier, squarer, and sterner than ever, made his reappearance in Belgrave-square, Lady Gertrude, much to her dismay, found the tables completely turned, and herself in the unpleasant position of one who was virtually asking forgiveness for an offence which had either never been perceived, or was now completely forgotten. I recollect a sardonic old trainer at Newmarket who, when his wife disputed with him, never vouchsafed her a reply, not from any amiable

motive of concession, but with the persuasion that such a course of treatment was the greatest punishment he could inflict. 'Women,' said the ancient misogynist, with a grin, 'women hate a *walk over!*' And indeed nothing can be so disappointing to those gentle beings as to discover that they have brought up all their artillery against an object which melts into air the moment they have pointed their guns. It must be aggravating to find ready submission where one has expected resistance 'worthy of one's steel,' stolid indifference where one anticipated entreaties and reproaches and complaints, obedience to those cruel commands it was never one's *real* wish to see enforced. I think if I was a woman under such circumstances, I should sit down and cry. I believe they sometimes do.

John Gordon, when he returned to England, had paid an early visit, as in duty bound, to Belgrave-square. Even Lady Olivia was glad to see his dark, honest face again, and greeted him with a cordiality foreign to her customary deportment. Gertrude, on the other hand, for the first time in her life felt troubled and uneasy—whiter than was becoming whilst he followed the servant who announced him through the ante-room, and redder than was convenient when she gave him her hand and welcomed him home. There was no lingering pressure in his grasp, no change of voice, nor colour, nor bearing, while he returned her greeting; neither indecision nor uncertainty in the bright, inscrutable eyes. If ever John Gordon looked like a man of iron, it was at that moment; and yet it was a moment he had anticipated and dwelt upon during many an hour of toil on land and wearisome monotony at sea. He meant that it

should be his last look on his imaginary Eden, his last gasp of the scented air from those gardens which must bloom for him no more.

John was a straightforward and determined man. With the fall of his worldly prospects, he was content to accept its inevitable accompaniment, the destruction of his castle in the air, with its moat and postern, its pinnacles and battlements, its bower of beauty and its stately keep, even of the tender flower that clung about its wall. What matter to us the strong man's dreams, all the fairer, perhaps, and gentler because of the stern moulding of his nature? What matter the future he could imagine so vividly with a woman's tenderness and a child's trust? or the abiding affection, deep and pure and strong as his own honest heart? or the iron links that only such men can rivet, that only such men can break? He had strength to sweep them all away, like so many fibres of gossamer before the cold north wind. He had strength to accept his task as it was offered him, and to do right for right's sake.

So when her aunt departed to her own den, as was her custom, and left the two young people alone in the back drawing-room, John took up his hat incontinently to go too. Lady Gertrude, quaking in her chair for what was to come next, did not sufficiently appreciate the relief she ought to have derived from this movement. In good truth, her first feeling was one of disappointment, succeeded by a keen sense of anger and a strong inclination to cry. But she resolved that she had some reparation to make for that heartless speech over which she had been brooding for so many months. She clung to the excuse that she was herself in the wrong,

that he had a perfect right to expect some amends, some explanation. The difficulty was how to set about it.

'You—you must have found it very *hot* in Australia,' was that young lady's insidious method of postponing the dreaded moment, and commencing the conversation.

'Very,' answered John, absently, looking down the while, and thinking what a pretty little foot it was that peeped so coyly from beneath the folds of that primrose-coloured morning dress.

'Are you not very glad to come home?' asked the fair diplomatist; a leading question, you may observe, and likely to produce remarks of a personal nature. There was an unusual softness in Lady Gertrude's voice, a timidity and hesitation in her manner that attracted John Gordon's attention to her face; the dark eyes shone with a mild lustre, and the colour came and went under the clear delicate skin.

'I went away because I was obliged,' answered he, sturdily; 'I came back for the same reason. We men of business, you know, Lady Gertrude, have no such fancies as likes and dislikes.'

She looked hurt and disappointed; she paused for a moment, and though her voice shook a little she tried again—

'I thought I should have seen you to wish you good bye. I had no idea you would really sail on such short notice. Gilbert told us a great deal about you in his letters; we were always so glad to hear. Mr. Gordon, you must have thought me very unkind the last time we met; I did not mean to be so. Indeed, I am rejoiced to see you back again.'

There was a moisture in the shining eyes as she

gave him her hand, with a pretty little imploring gesture, very winning in one usually so haughty and composed. John had need of all his resolution, all his firmness, not to raise it to his lips, to steal his arm round her, and take her once for all to his heart. But he was determined, uncompromising, and with certain old-fashioned ideas of honour and probity in his dealings with the weaker sex, now very generally exploded; so he held the little hand reverently and somewhat sorrowfully in his own.

'Believe me, Lady Gertrude,' said he, 'I have too few friends to lose one by taking offence where it is not meant; I am proud to be numbered amongst yours. I hope, however seldom we may meet in future, you will always consider me one of the truest and sincerest you have.'

With that he relinquished the hand, not daring to trust himself any longer in that too attractive society, and abstaining from another glance at Gertrude's tearful face, hurried out of the room and was gone.

They seldom met after this. John Gordon, putting his shoulder practically to the wheel, went less and less into society; and Lady Gertrude, attending, as is the wont of fashionable young ladies, party after party all the week through, thought it must be the sameness of her amusements that so palled upon her fancy, and the intense stupidity of her friends that made those wearisome festivities so dull.

Had you hinted to her that it was an irritating process, and of a saddening tendency, to scan those same crowds for one stern dark face, night after night in vain, and that the failure of the search might fairly account

for the disgust and *ennui* of the seeker, who would have denied the accusation so indignantly as Lady Gertrude?

Perhaps some unacknowledged harmony of feeling between the two may have made her at this epoch extremely tolerant of her cousin's society, extremely forbearing to his whims; for Gilbert was no longer the merry, acceptable guest, whose entrance into a room was like the taking down of a shutter, letting in a flood of enlivening light. On the contrary, his gloomy though impatient glance more resembled some resinous torch which casts a lurid glare on every surrounding object, now flaring into fantastic flames, now smouldering down to a deep red glow, suggestive of burning pain, and condensed fury ready at any moment to burst forth.

It soothed him, though, to be with Gertrude. All the old cousinly confidences began to return. Twice or three time a week Gilbert was sure to find himself in Belgrave-square; and Gertrude, with womanly tact and tenderness, was satisfied to mitigate and distract his sorrows without inquiring too closely into their origin. She too felt she was doing good,—the only balm for a wounded spirit, the only possible chance by which those who are injured in their tenderest affections can hope to divert their minds from their own selfish griefs,—selfish, indeed, and morbid, and imaginary, yet none the less painful for that. These fancied woes are sometimes harder to bear than the real tangible trials of life. It is only the old and worn-out—those who have outlived their hopes and fears—who are capable of analysing the sensations of the heart, long since dead within their breasts. Will they not agree with

me, that most of the pleasures and the pains of that life which once seemed to them so important were purely and essentially imaginary?

Why did your tears flow fresh and fast in a foreign clime, when they sent you a withered flower that had bloomed on your mother's grave? Why did your heart leap and thrill for joy when you read that the brother whom you have not seen since he left school, whom you would not know if you met him to-morrow a grown man, big and bearded, and bronzed by an Indian sun, had won the Victoria Cross with which our Queen rewards the bravest of the brave? Was it a corporeal and substantial annoyance that spoiled your dinner and kept you awake half the night because you were told Mrs. Verjuice had declared your wit to be buffoonery, and your genius an imposition, and your character a humbug?—or can you account upon any rational and material principles for the delight which you experienced when Fanny gave you a flower out of her bouquet at supper, and vowed you were the best waltzer in the room? You never entertained serious designs upon that affable young lady; soft as you were, you were never soft *enough* to be taken in by flirting Fanny's ways, and yet you were more pleased with the compliment and the rosebud than if any one had given you a hundred pounds. Yes, we may soon lose ourselves in the definitions of the Real and Ideal—where does the one end and the other begin? Hunger and thirst and fatigue are scarcely more physical sensations than love and hate and fear. A knock on the head does not stun you more effectually than the tidings of a great sorrow. Anxiety, disappointment, and wounded affection will

deface the physical man far more than fevers and such bodily ailments; the frame that hardship and climate have not wasted, will droop and dwindle under the gnawing influence of discontent; and even on the outward brow care ploughs her furrows deeper far than pain.

Lady Gertrude's bright eyes and buoyant step were losing day by day something of brilliancy and vigour, whilst her cousin looked ten years older than he had looked a twelvemonth ago. People said it was all owing to that odious Australian climate.

But whatever might have been the power of Fancy in poisoning the happiness of the denizens of Belgrave-square, those of Verbena Villa had to contend with a real and actual foe, whose advances would admit of no compromise and no half measures. Despite of the Alderman's wilful blindness, despite of Bella's schemes of retrenchment, despite even of John Gordon's honest intelligence and unceasing exertions, the crash had come at last. With the rest of the Alderman's personalty Verbena Villa must go to the hammer; and to the hammer accordingly went 'that desirable residence,' with its furniture and fixtures, its grand pianoforte, its double coach-house, and all its appurtenances and belongings.

It was a sad break-up and blow to the old Alderman, but Bella bore it bravely as a heroine, and busied herself in making the lodgings to which they removed at Brighton as comfortable as circumstances would permit. She redoubled her care and tenderness to her father; she encouraged him to talk to her of his ventures and his losses with the tact and perception of true affection.

She saw that this was the only method by which she could prevent him from continually brooding over his misfortunes. A sudden fall in the funds consequent upon a panic had completed that ruin of which the American and Australian losses had been the forerunners; and although John Gordon, whose own speculations were conducted with more foresight than those of his elder partner, remained an independent though an impoverished man, the Alderman was obliged to make over his whole personal property to liquidate his liabilities, and take refuge from absolute starvation in a small settlement which had been provided long ago for his only daughter.

It was sad to see the hospitable Villa dismantled and put up for sale; irritating to behold carpets hanging out at window, and mirrors with great spots of white-wash in their centres, and dirty men walking about, examining, appraising, and making themselves completely at home. It was aggravating to see the hospitable owner's choice wines offered for sale and bought up, though at inordinate prices, by Stirling Brothers, who never gave dinner parties, and old Plumber, who drank nothing but weak brandy-and-water. Above all, it was conducive to wrath and suggestive of profane swearing to watch heavy boots trampling the borders of Bella's neat flower-garden, and grimy hands pulling the wire fencing about to test its substance before bidding for it at so much per foot. To one spectator who had arrived early and on horseback these offences against good manners appeared particularly displeasing. Several lots were, however, knocked down to this energetic cavalier. The portrait

of the late Mrs. Jones, which excited but little competition, was purchased by him for a sum by no means complimentary to the artist who painted that work or the charms of the lady it represented; but on the other hand, a cottage pianoforte which stood in the *boudoir* fell to him after a brisk contest at the somewhat unreasonable price of fifty-five guineas. It soon became apparent, however, that this purchaser was determined to possess himself of any article for which he had once made an offer, and this fact ascertained, he was permitted to secure sundry trifles at not much more than twice their real value. The only exception to this forbearance was in the case of the parrot, for which desirable bird an old lady from St. John's Wood betrayed so morbid a longing as nothing but her antagonist's complete indifference to price was able to overcome. When the cage and its living contents were eventually knocked down to his lordship for seventeen guineas, the disappointed one suffered herself to be led away in a flood of tears.

An unusual spectacle might have been, and indeed *was* remarked in the vicinity of the Regent's Park, after the sale was concluded. Judging from their gestures, it afforded intense gratification to that observant class the London urchins, and consisted, indeed, of a mounted gallant proceeding at a hand-gallop in the direction of Baker-street, with a huge gilt cage containing a grey parrot swinging on his arm.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE FEVER SLEEP.

IT was about this time I returned to London. I had not been twenty-four hours in town before I sought tidings of my boy. I shall not soon forget the dismay with which I received intelligence that he was lying dangerously ill of a brain fever. I did not think any earthly communication could have made me so sick at heart again. Years ago, when every sunrise brought its fresh, glad hopes, and every night its holy, trustful calm, when the golden-green was still on the summer leaves, and ere the fragrance and the bloom had departed for ever from the flower, the sting of disappointment was in proportion to the exulting thrill of hope. It was but fair then that a great sorrow should prostrate us in the dust, as a great joy lifted us high above the clouds into the dazzling heaven. But now, when we have retired from the contest, when we have heart no more to don our mail and plate and leap into the saddle at the first trumpet-sound—when that last wound that sent us reeling out of the press a maimed disabled man for evermore, reminds us as it re-opens and bleeds afresh, how we are crushed and useless henceforth, we feel that we ought at least to have earned immunity

from further pain—that if we rode into the *mêlée* again, we should find the knights of to-day do not strike so hard, or push so fiercely as those grim champions with whom we held our own long ago; that even if the angry steel were to penetrate our defences, it would not bite so deep, nor leave so keen a smart as heretofore; nay, that if we have gained nothing else in our defeat, it has at least made it impossible that we should ever feel so bruised and sore again.

I did not think, I say, that any earthly tidings could have affected me as did this intelligence of Gilbert's dangerous illness. From his friends I learned out with difficulty the apparent cause of his malady.

Continual dissipation, obviously without the slightest enjoyment, violent exercise, taken with the sole object of exhausting the frame to the utmost, deep drinking at all hours, alone or in company, equally divested of all ideas of merriment and good fellowship, with the frequent use of laudanum to steady the shaking hand and close the sleepless eye, would have shattered a stronger frame and broken a healthier constitution than was ever possessed by any of the Ormes; and I think a description of one of Gilbert's days, as I gathered it in conversation with Holyhead and others of his intimate friends, would at once account for the state in which I found him on my arrival in London. He was an early riser, they said, though at this time, as long as he could persuade any one to sit up with him, nothing would induce him to go to bed, and was riding or walking at a rapid pace about the parks long ere any of his companions were astir. From his morning excursions he would come in heated and excited, to write

a few necessary letters, and smoke, generally without touching food. Towards the middle of the day he would have recourse to stimulants, and then play tennis, rackets, fence, or otherwise employ himself, for hours, in violent exertion, always with the same wild, restless manner which was becoming habitual to him. Later in the day he would be again on horseback, sometimes joining his friends in the Park, but oftener riding moody and solitary round the outskirts of London. Afterwards dinners, to which the most reckless and good-for-nothing of his associates were invited, were succeeded by frantic orgies, in which noise, and ribaldry, and excess reigned paramount. Perhaps he alone who was their chief promoter resisted the degrading tendency of these *réunions*. Certainly for him the cup never held a Lethean draught; and he would on occasion rise from a table at which all the others were more or less intoxicated, and go into society with a steady step and reserved, unfaltering eye. More often nights of deep play succeeded these evenings of debauchery; and continued losses, of which he seemed utterly careless, were already making rapid inroads on the fine fortune of the heir of West-Acres. But one redeeming point, and one only, was remarkable in these unbridled excesses. The other sex were rigidly excluded. Even in good society, Gilbert at this period avoided as much as possible the fairer portion of the assemblage, wincing, as it seemed, from some painful association connected with those that were softest, and brightest, and most loveable. But he shuddered at the bare mention of a woman's actual degradation; and though Clitus had been sure of a welcome to the feast

for the very extravagance of his potations, Phryne must have unveiled her ivory charms elsewhere.

Soon, when Orme's name was mentioned, people began to nod, and whisper, and shrug their shoulders. Although guiltless of being drunk with wine, the vacant stare betrayed at times that he was stupified with laudanum. His absent, restless manners, his unusual hours, and strange, variable conduct, now moody and morose, and anon breaking forth into frantic bursts of gaiety, denoted a state of mind little removed from insanity, and ere long it began to be hinted that Orme was mad. 'Very queer,' people said, touching their foreheads, and smiling quietly, as though there were something irresistibly ludicrous in the subversion of a human intellect. 'Gets it from his father. Was in confinement months before he died. Take five to two *this* one is shut up in a fortnight.' Holyhead used to get very angry, but he, too, could not help feeling alarmed about his friend. At last the blow fell—the blow that everybody but the sufferer had been daily expecting. At a large dinner party of boon companions, Gilbert was attacked by brain-fever, and carried from the table in an access of delirium.

The world, as we know, invariably adopts the least charitable conclusion. Years before it had voted the father mad, because he dropped out of its circle, and shut himself up in a country-house; now it was quite willing to be satisfied without inquiry of the insanity of the son. There is something to me inexpressibly painful in the levity with which this dispensation of Providence, and that other awful judgment, suicide, are discussed amongst mankind. Who can calculate

the horrors that haunt the wavering mind, the doubts and fancies that distract the quivering nerves, ere the twilight closes in utter darkness, and the morbid, imaginative temperament settles into confirmed madness? Who can tell the agony that must be endured, the bitter consciousness of complete desolation, the despairing glances here and there for a gleam of hope or a chance of escape, before the sufferer takes his fatal plunge, in the conviction that *any* lot must be preferable to that which he can endure no longer? And yet while men pity the loss of worldly fortune, or the maiming of a limb, or the failure of a cherished scheme, they can deem the maniac an object rather of contempt than commiseration, and console themselves with the suggestion of 'temporary insanity' as a cloak for the sufferings and the despair of the suicide. And oh! to think that a grain of timely aid, that a single loving word, might have saved both one and the other. Truly there is many a man who walks about erect with no mark of Cain upon his forehead, against whom, as earnestly as against the first murderer, 'the voice of a brother's blood crieth from the ground.'

Gilbert lay prostrate and insensible in his luxurious apartments, so out of keeping with thoughts of death or sickness. Indeed he had no lack of friends now at his need. Many a smart carriage stopped at the door, many a dandy associate hoped good humouredly that 'Gilbert would pull through, after all;' many a soft voice lisped its tender inquiries after Mr. Orme. Though they forgot him five minutes afterwards, yet for the moment they were really interested in his welfare. He who expects more from his friends, is likely to be dis-

appointed. Better than this, Lady Gertrude, giving up all engagements and amusements, braving, moreover, the remarks and inuendoes of her acquaintances, devoted herself unremittingly to the sick chamber. Coming early and staying late, she missed no opportunity of being useful to the sufferer, while the subdued energy and quiet force of her character made her an invaluable nurse. Holyhead also took his share of attendance on his friend, and John Gordon, though he did not press his assistance when he found it was not required, made it understood that he was always ready if wanted. I, too, petitioned earnestly to take my turn with the others. They had not the cruelty to refuse me. There were but few left on earth to whom my heart still clung. I felt kindly and charitably towards my fellow-creatures, as who does not that has known great sorrow? But there were scarcely one or two whose voices could still gladden me ever such a little, and one of those voices was my boy's. If it should be mute for ever? Woe is me! the last green leaf of all must wither from the branch.

It was sad to hear it now; sad to endeavour to hush it in the loud ravings of delirium; sadder still to mark the low hoarse whisper that tells so piteously of physical exhaustion. And it was sad, too, to see the gaunt, wasted frame, at which fever had been draining like a vampire for hours; the thin, shadowy hands, once so capable and strong, the hands that could wield the heaviest club, and stop the swiftest ball, and hold the hardest pulling horse, alas! feeble as an infant's now; the wan, sunken features, so sharp, yet so beautiful still; above all, those deep, cavernous eyes, that rolled

and shone with the lurid light of madness, and seemed to glare upon a thousand things at once; how deep and bright and awfully beautiful they were, as he lay there in the calm summer afternoons, and told of his spirit's wanderings with a power and eloquence that his weakness seemed to borrow from disease. How the glorious and the grotesque mingled themselves in his ravings, as the fever wings bore him away over land and sea to the strange realms of fancy, which none have visited without a vague consciousness that in some stage of existence they have been there before. How the beautiful fictions of antiquity, the gods and goddesses and nymphs of heathen mythology, were encircled and confused with fairies, and kelpies, and pixies, and all the store of Gothic superstitions of which I should have thought he could scarcely have heard. What torrents of long-neglected lore would burst forth, wherein I recognised, how painfully, the aptitude of the willing pupil whom I had cherished from a child. How link after link of the mind's mysterious chain led him on as the thread guided the hero through the labyrinth of old into that *other* world of which, in our ignorance, we know nothing, save that it is populous, and unfathomable, and illimitable. One hot afternoon I was left alone with the patient; a faint breeze laden with perfume from the *mignionette* in the open windows stole into the chamber, and the distant roll of carriages in the streets smote monotonously on my ear. He had been quiet for some hours, and I began to hope that the sleep to which we all looked as the last chance of his recovery had come at last. I did not dare to move, lest I should disturb his repose; and as his face was turned to the wall, I

could not ascertain whether he was really asleep or not. Worn out with anxiety and fatigue, I was getting drowsy myself, when a sudden movement in the bed made me turn round with a start, to watch my charge. He was sitting upright, his hands clasped, and his eyes fixed on vacancy with that expression which the fever nurse knows so well.

'How cold it is! how cold!' he muttered, with a shiver that made my own flesh creep. 'The blood was up to my knees, but I have forded the river at last; forded the river and crossed the moor, though the whins pricked me to the bare bone. Ah, True Thomas! there was no fairy queen to lead *me*. Alone, all alone! Ah! better so; my foot will be the steadier on the bridge. How narrow it is! and must I cross that hissing bar of iron? cross it barefoot, too? Have I never done a good turn in my life? I who never harmed a human being wilfully. And they all forsake me now. Curs and cowards! I would not take a hand of yours to save me from the eternal flames boiling and wreathing down below there, a thousand fathoms deep. I might have had a Friend who would not have failed me at the last! Too late now, too late; they are reading the Great Book with its flashing pages far away yonder on the golden sands that I shall never reach, and the grave white Angel shuts it up and shakes his head. I fear not, I care not. In the face of earth and heaven, all alone, I can cross it all alone. Here goes! Hurrah! I shall reach it yet! Ada! will you not come with me? Ada! my own, my beautiful, my best beloved; it is not heaven if you are left. See! I turn back for you. Look at me; only one look. You used not to be

so unkind! Speak to me, dear one. It is her voice; she is mine still, mine for ever. I am saved now, saved and happy; so happy; nothing can hurt me now.'

The last words came very weak, and in broken inarticulate syllables; and they were still dying on his lips as he sank back apparently insensible.

Much alarmed, I summoned his servant, to despatch him at once for the doctor. In my pre-occupation I had not remarked a feeble ring at the door-bell, and a whispered conference with that domestic in the passage. The man, I observed, was white and trembling, even before I told him what was the matter.

'Speak to the lady, sir,' he said, 'for the love of heaven. The nurse is up already, she can stay with master, whilst I run for the doctor. I shan't be five minutes.'

And so, without further explanation, he pointed to the door of a dining-room on the ground floor, and was gone.

Leaving Gilbert in a kind of stupor under the nurse's charge, and promising myself not to be away more than a few minutes, I entered the room indicated, and there found a lady seated near the window, in a state of the deepest distress and agitation. As she strove to rise, and sank back helpless in her chair, and strove to speak, but only gasped inarticulately with white lips and vacant eyes, I had some difficulty in recognising the face I had known and loved from a child, the once blooming and beautiful Ada Latimer. Yes, I had loved that face for years, partly for its own sweet sake, more for its resemblance to one I shall never see again on earth, perhaps, God help me, that I shall not be

permitted to meet in heaven. Strange that she should remind me of the lost one more than ever now! Poor Ada! she could not speak, but she grasped my hand, and looked in my face with an eager, wistful expression, that made my heart bleed. I know not what I said. I scarcely knew why she was there. I made her understand that at least *all* was not yet over; that the chamber of wasting and dangerous sickness above was not yet the chamber of death. She leaned her head upon her hands, and burst into a passion of weeping that seemed to do her good. After a while she looked up and smiled, such a piteous sad smile! as she pressed my hand once more.

'Thank God,' she said; 'I feared the worst, or I should hardly have been here. And yet,' she added abstractedly, and as if unconscious of my presence, 'I *could* not let him die all uncared for and alone. I who have been so cruel to him, so brutal, so ungrateful. I who have been his bane, his blight, his curse. Whom he chose from a thousand fairer, and better, and nobler than I am; and who gave him up at the first cold breath. And yet, what could I do? what *ought* I to have done? God help me! what shall I do *now?*'

Again she bowed her head upon her hands; and after a short interval looked up more soothed and more composed.

'I was far away in the country,' she said, meeting my eye quite frankly and openly, but not without a faint blush on her gentle brow; 'and I saw in the papers that Mr. Orme was dangerously ill. I came up immediately; I knew where he lived; do not ask me how or why; and—and—they had pity on my misery

and let me into the house. Tell me the truth; is he better? Do not be afraid. For the love of God tell me true; is there *any* hope?'

Any hope! What a despairing question. How often asked with blanched faces and wild imploring eyes, when the silver cord is frayed to the last fibre. How difficult to answer. How sad for the grave, kind doctor, on whose words the poor inquirer hangs as if he had the dispensation of life and death. How hard to tell the truth. How cruel to raise hopes that shall crush the heart they shelter in their ruins. *Any* hope! I could not tell Ada there was none. I said—

'He still lives; a change has come on within the last half-hour. It *may* be for the better.'

Oh the bright gleam that swept over her face for an instant like a glory, as she raised her thankful eyes to heaven. A moment afterwards they filled with tears as she took my hand in both of hers, and urged me in imploring accents to instal her as his nurse.

'I will be *so* quiet,' she said, '*so* careful. He will never know it. Directly he is out of danger I will go away. Oh, *do* let me. I entreat you. I will do everything on earth they tell me.'

I urged on her the necessity of keeping him quiet, the danger of the slightest agitation, and the general impossibility of such a proceeding. Also, as I was myself getting anxious about his state, I begged her to remain where she was for a few minutes, whilst I went upstairs to gather fresh tidings. She sat down, and waited patiently till I came back.

The crisis had indeed passed, and he was asleep. That sleep which the doctor said would save him if it

came within a certain period. He was breathing heavily, and, best sign of all, a beaded moisture was standing on his wan forehead. The good nurse pointed to him with a satisfied look—

'No need of the doctor now,' she whispered, 'and he can't be here for an hour yet, anyways. It's this blessed sleep as has saved him. Praised be the Lord!'

So it was. A load seemed taken from my heart, and though I could scarce tell why, I felt that he was rescued. I flew downstairs to Mrs. Latimer, and told her of the change that had taken place. It was not then, it was not till long afterwards, when I had leisure to think over the events of that anxious time, I became aware that his delirium was at its crisis precisely when she came into the house. I believe in my own mind that his senses, preternaturally sharpened, caught the tones of her low whisper in the hall. I believe that even on the confines of life and death his spirit turned back, true and unchanged, to the sound of the dear voice. I believe that even at the supreme moment *her* image filled the fever-maddened brain, and *her* influence soothed down the paroxysm and hushed it off to the slumber which saved his life.

Poor Ada! She bowed her head down till her cold forehead touched my hands, as she clasped them fervently in both her own. Then she looked up so beseechingly, so tearfully.

'May I not see him?' she said. 'Only for one instant—only *one* look, and never, *never* again,' she added, with a mournful earnestness that I was not meant to hear.

He must have had a harder heart than mine who

could have resisted those pleading eyes. I took her hand and led her to the door of Gilbert's chamber, entering softly on tiptoe and with bated breath lest we should wake the patient. He was lying perfectly relaxed and helpless, sunk in that profound sleep which is only produced by utter debility. I drew the nurse to the window, for I thought indeed no mortal eye should look on that loving woman in her great agony. Have I lived, like many another, to forego the dearest hopes I cherished here on earth, and shall I not feel for those from whom the daylight hath departed for evermore—for whom henceforth the rush of streams and the song of birds and the laughter of children is no longer a carol from the heavens, but a requiem for the dead? I could not succour nor comfort her. I heard the stifled sob, the low moan painfully repressed, and I held my breath and turned my eyes doggedly away.

The rustle of her dress made me look up once more. She was leaving the room without a thought of any one in it but him to whom she had bid her silent farewell. At the door she turned, and, stooping down, pressed her lips against the threshold, and so with that last kiss of humble, hopeless homage, dropped her veil and walked soberly and sadly away. My poor Ada! that proud but loving heart must have been nearly breaking then.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A COLD DINNER.

MR. GORDON is making his way in a Hansom cab through the many difficulties and impediments that infest the journey from any part of the metropolis to London-bridge station. Enterprising cabmen have indeed discovered, so to speak, a north-west passage on the Surrey side, which, while they make their charge for a considerable *détour*, they affirm to be the more expeditious, although the longer route. But impatient travellers, doubtful of 'catching the train,' will agree with me that the narrow and winding streets of this insidious approach are almost as unfavourable to punctuality as the constant stoppages of the more direct thoroughfare. Be this as it may, John Gordon's brows are sterner and his manner more uncompromising than usual as he directs his driver to make all the haste he can to save the five o'clock train.

A decided man in a state of indecision is always an amusing sight. He invariably assumes for the occasion an air of preternatural determination, as though to mask with extra resolution of front the wavering of his main body, and so to bully himself and others into the belief that he is not to be induced to depart one inch from his usual course. All the time he is con-

scious of feeling painfully ridiculous. Mr. Gordon is at this juncture suffering acutely from the sensations I have described. The cabman who drives him thinks he never met 'a gent' with whom he would be so unwilling to adopt his favourite plan of 'trying it on;' in other words, who would be so unlikely to submit to imposition. If the cabman only knew, he might to-day for the only day in the year grossly overcharge him with impunity. John is not habitually the least of a sophist, but he is trying even now to persuade himself that it is his duty to run down to Brighton and see Gilbert, that he has no other object in view than a visit to his old friend, and that he does not care the least whether or not he is late for the train; all which are egregious fallacies, and the man *within the man* knows them to be such.

He is *not* late for the train, however, and during the fifty minutes that he is whirling along at the rate of a mile for every minute, we may take a peep at the family party to which he is about to pay his hurried visit. Perhaps we shall not be altogether persuaded of his assumed carelessness as to whether he goes or stays.

Extended on a sofa in a bay-window jutting into the street, commanding a view of 'down channel' and the ominous clouds that always gather towards evening over Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight, lies Gilbert Orme, wan, weakened, and attenuated, yet drinking in with every breath new life from the reviving westerly breeze. His attitude and appearance are of themselves sufficiently picturesque to attract the notice of the passers-by without the aid of Lady Gertrude's graceful form, who is bending over his couch and ministering

to him as only women can minister to the wants of an invalid. At Brighton our English reserve unaccountably merges into the opposite extreme. The houses are so constructed that the denizens of the ground floors live to all intents and purposes in the street, and we are satisfied, as the most southern of foreigners could be, with the publicity. So everybody that passes can see the cousins; and for seclusion, they might as well be in Pall-Mall.

Gertrude has been reading to him. One of his favourite books now—speculative, melancholy, and mysterious; such a book as you would choose to read in the grey autumn afternoon, when the wind is roving in gusts and the dry leaves are pattering down by scores and whirling about on the russet earth. It has lost nothing of its melancholy or its interest in the tones of that full young voice, and the reader's lips have not forborne to quiver ever and anon, as though the words she uttered stirred some deep chord of feeling at her heart. She has shut it now and is looking wistfully at Gilbert, who tosses wearily upon his sofa.

'It is a fallacy,' she says, 'Gilbert, from beginning to end, and yet the writer knows human nature so well that he attacks us in our weakest place, and makes us for the moment agree with him and believe in his philosophy.'

'A fallacy!' he replies, with a harsh weak laugh; 'so is everything. Show me a code that people abide by—a faith that they do not *virtually* deny every day—and then you may call this a fallacy more than the rest. This man only does not pretend to ignore what we really are. He argues from our conscious

weakness and our continual aspirations after strength that we are in a state of transition. He says very justly that suffering is the normal condition of helplessness, and that we are not compelled to accept that condition. I believe him. I believe our fate is in our own hands.'

'Oh! Gilbert,' she remonstrates, 'have you ever been *really* unhappy? Have you ever felt that everything on earth had deserted you—that there was nothing left to cling to, and you were far too weak to stand alone? Then you must have been convinced that man, without some extraneous aid, is utterly and essentially helpless.'

He smiles bitterly at the first part of her sentence; but as she proceeds he seems to analyse his past feelings and weigh their testimony for and against her inference. It is in the hard tone of one who reasons not entirely with his convictions that he replies,

'If you ask me, have I ever felt utterly helpless and undone, I answer, Yes. If you ask whether I looked about in vain for a remedy and a palliative, I answer, No. This man is right. I have felt it a thousand times. The remedy is in my own hands. The palliative is to dwell continually on that remedy. What does he say? "Endurance is indisputably the highest form of bravery, yet doth the slave endure his chain for lack of courage to throw it off. All depends upon the motive." His inference is obvious. But I should not talk these matters over with you, dear Gertrude, who have never known sorrow. God forbid you should ever think as I do. Thank you for reading to me, and there's an end.'

'Oh, no,' she replies, with grave, earnest tones. 'I

understand you better than you think. I too have known sorrow, deep and engrossing, and *very* hard to bear. Do not inquire how. I *asked* for strength and courage to endure it, Gilbert, I did indeed; and you don't know how much easier it became after that. This book may be very clever and logical and profound, but there is something in mankind more convincing than reason, and not a sentence of it speaks to the heart like that invitation in another book to the weary and heavy-laden that they may have rest. Dear Gilbert, you have been very near death within the last few weeks. Think what would have become of you then!'

Why was his defiant spirit so easily roused to arms now? That last remark hardened him directly.

'I must have taken my chance,' he said, with another jarring laugh. 'We shall never think alike on these matters. Don't let us talk of them any more. I'm tired now.'

John Gordon, arriving with his humble *valise* in a Brighton fly, could not but see the cousins as he descended at the door of the mansion they inhabited. 'They look very like lovers,' thought John, with a tightening about that manly chest of his. 'I suppose it's all settled by this time. From my soul I hope she'll be happy.' And so Mr. Gordon composed his features and smoothed down his crisp black curls as the servant announced him; and Gilbert greeted him with almost boisterous cordiality, the while Gertrude gave him a very cold, impassive hand, and never lifted her eyes to his face. You see, this was what he had been working double-tides for to ensure a few hours' holiday—this was a judicious soother and consolatory

sedative after the agitation of the journey down, none the less fervent that the strong man kept it so sternly repressed. This was another of the moments he had been looking forward to—though he would not confess it, of course—for a week—a month—never mind how long.

I have the pleasure of being acquainted with a very jovial old gentleman who was young in the days of *real* winters and long coaches, and who travelled *outside* the mail from London to Edinburgh in a bitter frost for the mere gratification of spending half-an-hour in the society of a damsel to whom he believed himself devoted. He had not seen her for several months, and had put himself to much trouble and inconvenience, besides the rotatory and refrigerating penance of the North Mail, to procure this interview, hoping, not without reason, that it might be an agreeable surprise. How do you think she received him? The young lady was *en papillote*, a guise now fortunately exploded, and anything but becoming to the human face. 'It's *you*, is it?' she said, in tones far more suggestive of surprise than satisfaction. 'Dear me! how tiresome! I wish I'd known in time to have taken my hair out of curl-papers.'

The thaw had commenced when my friend went back, he travelled, moreover, *inside*, and in company with two stout ladies and a rich banker. He always affirmed, however, that he felt the cold far more biting on this second journey than the first.

John Gordon's inward temperature, as we know, does not affect his outward demeanour. He proceeds to dress for dinner, calmly and methodically, as we all do,

whatever may be our hidden state of suffering or suspense. Do you think Hero forgot to 'do up her back hair' before she ran down to the beach to meet Leander's body tossed on the mocking wave? Do you suppose Curtius had a speck on his flashing mail, or a buckle of his accoutrements awry, when he rode so straight at that last 'yawner' which was to close over him for ever? Even the 'Great Montrose' went to his execution attired like a bridegroom; and Mary Stuart laid her head upon the block in the dress that best became that dangerous beauty which sorrow and imprisonment had not faded, which survived the loss of throne and friends and freedom—broken faith, broken fortunes, and a broken heart.

The dinner passed off slowly and formally enough. Lady Olivia, who presided, and who had been with difficulty persuaded by Lady Gertrude to take charge of her son's convalescence—the only method by which the latter could ensure having Gilbert under her own eye—was not at any time a lively acquisition to a small party. Moreover, she was annoyed at her enforced absence from London, and made no secret of her cordial hatred for Brighton. Bella Jones, the only guest besides John, seemed absent and out of sorts, which was not to be wondered at, considering all things. She and her father were living for economy in a small cottage outside the town, and the Alderman's health was failing day by day. Poor Bella nursed him with unremitting assiduity; but it was weary work for the young girl, with no companions of her own age, and nothing to occupy her but the variable temper and peevish fancies of an invalid. The kind old Alderman was sadly broke

now. His mind appeared to be somewhat enfeebled as well as his body; and though he loved his daughter dearly, he worried her without ceasing from morning till night.

Even John Gordon's presence did not seem to brighten her up as it used to do. Kind Lady Gertrude had persuaded her aunt to ask Bella to meet him, thinking (so she said) 'it would be such an agreeable surprise for both.' I am not sure, however, that this was her real motive. So the party were somewhat at cross-purposes, as is often the case in our artificial life. Gilbert was too weak to sit up, and was lying on a sofa in the drawing-room, which accounted to John Gordon's entire satisfaction for Lady Gertrude's obvious pre-occupation and absence of mind. That sprightly damsel, usually so full of conversation and *savoir-vivre*, was to-day extremely silent, not to say stupid, and scarcely ever lifted those brilliant eyes of hers off her plate. They never met Mr. Gordon's once. The latter gentleman might have spared himself all anxiety about 'catching the train.' I think his appetite would have been keener, and he would have made a better dinner at his club. Here he was, however, and he must make the best of it, so he listened patiently to Lady Olivia, who being a little afraid of him, liked him better than most of her acquaintance. Lady Olivia's conversation was not interesting. It related chiefly to her disgust at her present residence, and the impositions practised on her by her servants. These topics, discussed in a loud harsh voice, without the slightest reserve, did not tend to raise her listener's spirits; and when the ladies withdrew, and John was left alone with a voluminous

dessert, and four full decanters—port, sherry, claret, and madeira—it is not surprising that he had not the heart to touch one or the other.

In the drawing-room it was worse. Gilbert, in one of the moody fits to which he had become so subject since his illness, had returned to his bedroom. Lady Olivia was fast asleep in an arm-chair, and considering she had just begun sea-bathing, this was excusable enough. Gertrude had entrenched herself behind Bella and a tea-table, so that it was impossible to say two words to her in private, even had John's pride permitted him to entertain such a wish. Miss Jones was the most at her ease of the trio; but it was hardly to be expected that she could sustain the whole conversation single-handed; and after tea was taken away the *gêne* began to become oppressive. There was no pianoforte, so music was out of the question, and John could not go away, because he had a bed in the house.

It was an immense relief when Bella rose to take her departure; and Gertrude, with a peculiarly immoveable countenance, suggested to Mr. Gordon that he should escort her home. As the night was fine, they walked soberly off arm-in-arm, like a brother and sister; and I think one of them felt very distinctly that no warmer feeling now existed between them. The other was thinking of a cold proud face and a clear pitiless voice that seemed to ring in his ears still—

'Good night, Mr. Gordon, and good bye, as you will be gone to-morrow morning before I shall be up.'

Bella and John soon fell into confidential conversation. They talked of her father's losses quite unreservedly, of her present condition and future prospects.

They both enjoyed their walk very much, and soon got back to old times and old recollections, and, above all, the dear abandoned Villa. Bella betrayed much interest, and asked a thousand questions about the sale, wondering in her own mind which of her father's old friends it could have been that had sent her the parrot and the pianoforte, and a number of little household trifles, with such delicacy and kind feeling. To-night she was destined to be enlightened, for John, who had been successfully trying to raise her spirits by a comical rather than a mournful account of the proceedings, concluded his details of the auction's humours thus—

'But, above all, you would have laughed, Bella, if you could have seen Holyhead cantering about the Regent's Park with the cage and the parrot hanging to his arm!'

Happy Bella! It was too dark to see the blush that sprung to the roots of her hair, but she wished John 'Good night' with a hearty squeeze that was the next thing to an embrace. She longed to kiss him—her kind, dear, good old John Gordon. And she went to bed, for the first time for months, with a glow of real indisputable happiness at her heart. No bad nightcap, reader! Alas! that, like other nightcaps, it should be so much out of vogue.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

WEST-ACRES.

WHAT an agreeable and thoroughly English life is that which our foreign friends envy us so sincerely, and which they call our *vie de château*. There is nothing the least like it abroad. Continental nations do not understand that pleasant intercourse which combines the polish of society with the cordiality of intimate friendship, nor do they appreciate the merits of that neutral territory on which it is so agreeable to meet, where formality can be forgotten without detriment to propriety and self-respect. Moreover, the women's complexions will not stand investigation at breakfast-time. It is too early an hour, and French, German, or Italian beauty prefers to have its coffee in its bed-room, and descend in elaborate *toilette*, armed at all points, about 2 or 3 p.m. It is only a handsome, healthy Englishwoman like Lady Gertrude who can come down at nine in the morning, fresh, clear, and *rayonnante*, dressed for the whole day.

After many years' absence, I was indeed interested to find myself again at West-Acres. Gilbert, on his recovery, had pressed me earnestly to come and see him once more at the old place, where he meant to spend the autumn, and I willingly broke through those

habits of reserve and indolence which had been growing upon me for so long, and steeling myself against memories on which it was a mockery now to dwell—memories from which time had plucked the sting, but never could efface the marks. I travelled down, as I had promised, into the West country, and arrived late at night towards the close of September, soon after the whole family had retired to rest.

It was not till the following morning at breakfast that I had leisure to look about me, to identify the old familiar scenes of long ago, and to scrutinize the changes time had made in the few faces I ever cared to look on now. The party was small, but there was not one in whom I did not take an interest, either personal or for the sake of my boy. I had been fatigued with my journey, and slept long. When I came down, I was the last arrival at the breakfast-table but one. Lady Olivia, Lady Gertrude, Lord Holyhead, and John Gordon were already down; but my host's place was still vacant, and his letters lay by the side of his plate, ready for perusal against his appearance. I have a keen eye for trifles (if indeed there *are* such things as trifles: a minute grain of sand in the eye will cause as much suffering as a lance-head in the body), and it pained me to notice even so simple an indication of *insouciance* as these unopened letters. It argued such an utter want of interest in their contents, such a hopelessness that any post could bring *him* welcome intelligence, such a general depression and relaxation of mind thus to ignore the arrival of that which we all look forward to with more or less interest, that I could but feel

grieved and anxious even with respect to so unimportant an incident.

Lady Olivia received me with her usual cold politeness. Some natures are totally insensible to the power of association, and of such was her ladyship's. My presence did not seem to recal to her the bright days of yore, when West-Acres was the centre of gaiety and hospitality—when the broken, miserable man who was now its owner was a laughing child, rich in the glorious inheritance of hope—when she herself had the opportunities for happiness in her own hands, and might have made a kindly and obedient wife to him who sank so helplessly at last into a drunkard's grave. Perhaps all this never occurred to her; and yet I have heard it said that even Lady Olivia once had a woman's heart in her bosom—that Ada's father, when the gay young Captain Glyn, had been the object of her first affections, and that it was his indifference to the high-born lady which drove her into a hasty and ill-assorted marriage, which made her a hard, unfeeling woman ever afterwards. If this be indeed the truth, it is a strange, sad story.

She received me, however, with as little emotion as though I had been in the habit of breakfasting there every day; and I must confess that for the moment I envied her the armour of proof in which she seemed to be encased. Not so Lady Gertrude. Contrary to her wont, her hand trembled and her voice shook as she bade me 'Good morning;' and I could see by the nervous agitation of her manner—the more remarkable in her who was usually so cool and composed—that the

arrival of her old friend was fraught with much anxiety and many painful associations. I know now that she dreaded to hear my opinion as to the state of her cousin's health.

John Gordon and Holyhead were in the common disguise of English gentlemen who are going partridge shooting. They both greeted me with a cordial welcome. The former I observed looked even graver and colder than his wont, but John's reserve I knew of old was so impenetrable that it was hopeless to speculate on the demeanour of his outward man; and the peer, with a most enviable appetite for breakfast, made rather more noise and took up more room than usual.

'How late Gilbert is!' said Lady Gertrude, refilling the teapot with becoming assiduity. 'Uncle Edward, did you see him last night when you arrived?'

There was no relationship between us, but 'Uncle Edward,' I must here observe, was the name by which I was known in the family. It originated in some childish joke, and had never been discontinued. I answered in the negative; for I had been so much beyond my time that everybody had gone to bed. I could see Gertrude waited eagerly for my reply.

'He is not *near* well yet,' she went on in a low hurried tone, and looking nervously at the door. 'I hope the air and exercise will do him good. He used to be fond of shooting. But he must not walk too much. Over-exertion is so bad for him. You must take good care of him, Lord Holyhead, you and Mr. Gordon.'

A wistful expression crossed the nobleman's face as

she spoke, and he pushed his plate away, which was still half-full. John Gordon never looked up from his breakfast, nor did his iron mask vary one shade.

Just then Gilbert made his appearance. He shook hands with me, and welcomed me to his house with almost the old boyish cordiality and gaiety. For a moment my heart leapt to think how well and strong he had grown once more, laughing to scorn the anxious fears which had oppressed me since I left him rescued from the very jaws of death in a sick-bed in London; it sank again a moment afterwards when he sat quietly down to read his letters, and I could mark the settled gloom that pervaded his countenance in its repose.

I did not like to observe him too narrowly; for every now and then I caught his eye glancing stealthily up from his occupation, as if jealous of being watched. There was a glare in it too, like that of some wild animal in a noose. It puzzled me, that strange unreasoning look. I had seen something like it in other eyes before, but I shuddered to think *where* I had seen those eyes and whose they were. For the rest, his brown hair was worn thin, and streaked with whole patches of grey—his forehead was wrinkled—his features sunk, and there were deep lines about his mouth that told of worse than sickness and physical suffering. Altogether, he looked ten years older than when I had seen him last, even in the crisis of his malady. It seemed impossible that this could be the young Apollo of a dozen years ago. It was touching to mark the very attitude I knew so well. The same in which he used to bend over his studies ere he jumped up with some light jest to fling the book away, and stand before

me the impersonation of youth and health and hope and budding manhood. His gestures were never impatient now. He moved like a man under some heavy weight. Every limb seemed to drag listlessly and slowly, as if shackled. Where was the graceful freedom of the athlete? And Lady Olivia was the only person that could not, or that would not, see this great and awful change!

I was obliged to dissemble my emotion. The present was no time for ill-judged sympathy or impertinent criticism. I *felt* that Lady Gertrude was watching me with eager interest to compare my first impressions with her own. Once our eyes met. I had need of all my self-command then not to betray my sorrows and my fears.

She came to the rescue, however, with the kind tact in which she never failed. One or two letters from the pile beside her plate were already opened, and as the conversation was slackening woefully, she began to enlighten us as to their contents. The general news and gossip of the day was welcome to all her listeners, and even Gilbert looked up and betrayed an interest in his cousin's correspondence. Lord Holyhead, too, was full of jokes and curiosity.

'There is one left, Lady Gertrude,' said he, 'that you have not read to us. Of course it's the cream of the whole lot. From a lady, too, I can tell by the colour of the envelope. Now *do* indulge us with a breach of confidence, and read it from beginning to end.'

Lady Gertrude smiled and glanced restlessly at John Gordon, while she answered Lord Holyhead—

'It's from Bella Jones,' said she, without looking at the latter; 'poor dear! it's a long journey for her, but she will be here by dinner-time.'

Gaiters must be inconvenient appendages, even for a sportsman, if they often require so much attention during breakfast as did Lord Holyhead's at this juncture.

Perhaps I was the only person who remarked how very much he flushed in consequence of stooping to buckle those defences.

He soon recovered himself, however. It is only boys and girls who cannot re-adjust the domino at a moment's notice, should the wearer indeed be sufficiently clumsy to let it slip off at all. Holyhead had been too often to the *masquerade* to remain long at fault.

'How is her father?' he inquired, in rather a loud, off-hand tone—'does she say anything about him?—and when do you expect her?'

'He is better,' replied her ladyship, 'or Bella would not be coming here. She ought to arrive to-day by the four o'clock train—the one Uncle Edward contrived to miss yesterday, in his unwillingness to tear himself from London.'

'Ah, Lady Gertrude!' said I, 'my London and yours have very different significations. You could not even find your way about those sober regions which lie at the back of the British Museum, and which people used to call *Mesopotamia* when I was young; and I should be equally lost in your gay and glittering May Fair, the enchanted land you are so fond of, only fit for fairies like yourself.'

Lady Gertrude sighed. 'You may well call it fairy

land, Uncle Edward,' said she; 'you have no idea how soon the glamour wears off. The gingerbread is none the better in Vanity Fair for being gilt, and they gild it very badly, after all; don't you think so?'

'Gingerbread is very unwholesome,' remarked Lady Olivia, 'and for my part I can't say I see the merit of it. That reminds me, Gilbert, have you given any orders about luncheon?'

'Yes, mother,' replied her son, waking out of a fit of abstraction; 'I have seen the keepers. We can take Elmhurst and Rosebank in one beat. So if Gertrude likes to join us at the top of Marigold-lane, in the pony-carriage, she can bring the luncheon. Then we shall have the forty-acres and the home-farm for the afternoon; not a gun has been fired there yet; we ought to get fifty brace.'

The two sportsmen emitted that low murmur of approbation with which such announcements are usually received, and Gertrude also seemed to coincide with the proposed arrangements.

'You will come with *me*, Uncle Edward?' said she; 'I want to show you the new lodges, and then I can drop you when you are tired of me, and drive to the station for Bella. By-the-bye, the cart can go for her things, as she has no maid.'

'Do you mean she is coming quite by herself?' exclaimed Lord Holyhead; and for the moment I think he regretted the earnest nature of his costume, which would admit of no compromise as to his purpose, and the keen attachment he had always displayed for the sports of the field, which made it impossible to shirk off and attend at the railway station.

'Why not?' said Lady Gertrude, 'the young ladies of the present day are very independent, and it is high time, in my opinion. We women are determined at last to assert our rights. We have been kept down quite long enough.'

She glanced quickly at John Gordon as she spoke, but he was conversing with Lady Olivia in a low tone, and either did not hear or did not notice her remark.

All this time Gilbert was reading his letters without apparently deriving the slightest information from their contents. His breakfast consisted of a single cup of coffee and a morsel of bread.

Without further sustenance, Lady Gertrude whispered to me, he would go through the hardest day's work, and at dinner would be nearly as abstemious in his eating, though he drank hard, and with a sort of fretful impatience, like a man in pain. No wonder he looked so ill, no wonder his form was so wasted and his eye so wild.

'Had not Lady Olivia noticed it?' I asked; 'was she not anxious about her son?'

'Not till I pointed it out to her,' she answered, 'not till I told her how alarmed all his friends were about him, and that I thought myself he had one foot in the grave.'

'Did she not take fright then?' I asked, remembering that even Lady Olivia was a mother.

'She said his system probably wanted bracing, and recommended homœopathy,' was the reply.

It seemed only yesterday I had seen the brave, bright child fall with his pony in the park, had marked

him appeal instinctively to his only parent for sympathy and assistance, and had wondered how she could refuse it so coldly. How well I rememembered it all. I walked into the library to write my letters with a heavy heart.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

FAMILY LIKENESSES.

BUT I could not get on with my letters. Do what I would, it was impossible to force my thoughts into any other channel than that in which they persisted in flowing. Here was I once more in the old house at West-Acres. Once more under that well-remembered roof; why, there was not a brick in its whole structure, not a tree in the park, nor a walk in the shrubbery, that was not to me alive with painful memories and bitter, sweet associations. I did not dare draw up the blinds of the very window over against which I sat, and yet why not? I had been seeing that elm avenue every day for forty years. It would look to-day with the sun on it, just as it did *that* time. My hair is worn and grey, my limbs are wasted, my form bent, and my teeth gone, yet even now I cannot see the sunlight flickering through an elm tree, or the tender fern waving in the breeze, but that, were it not for very shame, I would fain turn aside and weep. I have been a man of peace all my life, useless, it may be, and but a blade of tares amongst the wheat; an unprofitable servant indeed, and a helpless, but I have never been an overt and presumptuous rebel. I have committed no heinous and

unpardonable crime. I am no murderer, no suborner, no thief. Why must I be haunted for ever with that one ineffaceable picture? Is my punishment, like Cain's, to be greater than I can bear? Two are pacing up and down the last forty yards of that arch-roofed avenue—the rich autumn corn fields are studded with ricks, and glowing in the noon-day glare—the cattle are standing knee-deep in the shrunken bed of the broad, shallow river; myriads of insects circle in the sunbeams as they stream athwart the long perspective of the glade. It is a time of ripened promise, of mature beauty, of reward and fruition throughout all nature. And still those two pace backwards and forwards, every turn threatening to be the last, and still the one pleads with tearful eagerness, and still the other's face is turned haughtily and pitilessly away. So they parted in anger, and met—never again—never again.

Years rolled on, so painful and harassing whilst there was hope, so long and dreary when doubt had sunk into certainty. The blow was felt over and over again in anticipation before it fell—there was no fresh place left in which another sting could be planted when the last stroke was dealt upon the numbed and stupefied sufferer. Then the grave closed over the one, and the other buried heart and hope for evermore. Since that the pilgrimage seems to have no landmarks. Tardy and noiseless, yet with something soothing in its monotony, has been the journey over that wide waste of sand. Palm trees and springs of gushing water have not lain in the wayfarer's track, and there is no *mirage* for eyes that were dimmed so long ago with tears. Neverthe-

less, we may count our footsteps now, for we cannot but be near the end. It must be that soon we shall see the blue sea sparkling in the horizon, and the white shroud-like sail that is waiting to waft us home.

There are many consolations for the aged which the young can never be brought to understand. If our joys are not so keen as yours, my blooming minor, we do not chafe, and fret, and fight with the wind under our griefs. A certain resignation, less the result of content than of hopelessness, forbids us to kick with our gouty feet against the pricks. We accept the bitter potion, so to speak, and gulp it down with a wry face. Whereas *you* must needs shout and struggle, and have your nose held, and swallow it the wrong way after all, till you extract twice its natural nausea from the draught. But there is one pang that probes us very sharply, from which *you* are exempt. One reflection that makes us feel very sad and uncomfortable, that causes *you* too often to deem us meddlers, and officious, and unkind. When time and necessity have reconciled us to our own shipwreck, when though we can never forget it, we have ceased to dwell upon the hour that saw our goodly vessel broken up, and our precious cargo heaving on the wave, it *does* gall us to mark your young confidence steering straight for the hidden reef, it *does* grieve us to see you too swamped and engulfed in the briny waters, stretching madly at the illusive spar that dances just beyond your reach, turning wild eyes to the pitiless heaven that seems to mock your need and your despair.

It is the recollections inspired by this old library that have made me so *sombre* a moralist to-day. This old

library, in which I had spent so many hours of study, so many hours of dreamy listless abstraction. It was a beautiful room, too, and thoroughly in keeping with the fine old place. It is needless to describe it, people always skip descriptions, and truth to tell, I could never, for as often as I have perused it, take a thorough inventory of its contents. My eye was always arrested by a certain picture which hung above the lofty chimney-piece. A picture painted long ago by an unknown artist, yet of extraordinary merit, and worked out with a skill and knowledge of light and shade not unworthy of Rembrandt himself. It represented a young man of considerable beauty, with the brown hair and rich complexion hereditary in the Ormes, dressed in the gorgeous apparel of Charles II.'s reign; and I remember that connoisseurs could never sufficiently praise the skill with which the artist had wrought out the elaborate ornaments and details of his costume, while at the same time he kept them down in the deep shadow that was indispensable to the development of his conception. Two or three subordinate figures in the background were carousing round a table, and the broad humour of their jollity, with a certain coarseness of expression and attitude, might have been borrowed from the Dutch school. But the principal character was essentially an original creation. Standing forward with a half-emptied goblet in his hand, he seemed to be giving some toast of more unbridled audacity than even his boon companions could appreciate or understand. His full lip curled with an expression in which joviality, recklessness, and a certain sorrowing self-contempt were strangely mingled; but it was

in the eyes the painter had displayed the whole power and resources of his genius. Deep, wild, and piercing, they seemed to flash from out the canvas, and yet there was a subdued melancholy in their expression truly touching. The effect was so life-like as to be startling, even unpleasant. I remember that Lady Gertrude when a child used to make faces and shake her little fist through the closed door at the dreaded picture, but that when brought into the room she would scream to be taken away in an access of horror at her aversion. 'I want to go, I want to go,' she would repeat, 'I don't like its eyes!' And many a time have I carried her into the drawing-room and soothed down her terror with her picture books and her toys. There *was* a story, too, connected with the painting, a legend of the house that gratified the pride of the Ormes, as people are proud of any notoriety, good or evil, which has distinguished some member of their family long ago. We can boast of our pedigrees, we mushrooms of the West; and yet we can despise the lineage of a Jew who counts back to the building of the Temple, or an Arab whose progenitor, a man of ancient family then, stood by Mahomet in the cave. I am not sure but that these same pedigrees are valued in proportion to their brevity. I have heard that now they have had time to own grandfathers, the Yankees are beginning to talk about *their* ancestors. Well, perhaps it is an amiable weakness, after all; certainly a cheap and innocent display. I believe for five-and-twenty pounds the Heralds' College will trace you up to Royalty in the tenth or twelfth generation; and who, for the trifling consideration of a 'pony,' but would choose to be so near the purple as that? They need

not have been so proud of him, though, for after all there was not much to boast of in this scion of the House of Orme, nor in his history. I have been told the legend over and over again. I believe it to be a true story. I can remember every word of it. Here it is:—

Frank Orme was a second son; like many other second sons, his fortune was meagre, his position very galling to a proud, undisciplined spirit. His elder brother Rufane was not the man to smooth his difficulties, or to lend him a helping hand in the little scrapes and petty troubles which then as now embarrassed the lot of younger brothers with high spirits and low incomes. Rufane was a morose unamiable person, conscientious in the discharge of what he considered his duties, but making no allowances for the slightest dereliction on the part of others, and altogether a characteristic specimen of the party to which he adhered. When the 'troubles' began, Rufane had espoused the side of the Parliament, and become, moreover, a tolerably rigid Presbyterian. Nor did he confine his political tenets to abstruse speculations. He led out his tenants under Essex, sorely against their will, to do battle with the King, and had once the honour of exchanging sword-thrusts with Prince Rupert in a charge. It was well for Mr. Orme that he wore a breastplate of proof on that occasion, also that the Prince, who swept down upon him like a hawk, had other matters to attend to than a repetition of his thrust. Frank of course adopted the other side, and made his first essay in arms as a stripling at Edgehill. His childish face was as forward amongst the pikes of the rebels as many a rugged veteran's, and the boy seemed to take kindly and naturally to the trade of slaughter. After

such a demonstration the brothers of course became avowed enemies; but even this open hatred, bitter as it was, and unnatural between two of the same blood, was preferable to the malice that had been rankling for years. A thousand little every-day occurrences had long embittered them against each other; and if Rufane's was a disposition not to overlook an offence, Frank's was one that could neither forgive nor forget an injury. Scenes of insult and humiliation had made a deep impression in the younger brother's breast. It was a custom in the family to close the carousals, of which they were all somewhat too fond, with a parting toast—'To our next merry meeting!' and the practice had not been suffered to die out in Rufane Orme's time, who, Puritan as he was, showed no disinclination to such pleasures of the senses as were permitted by his creed. One bright summer's evening the brothers sat together at the supper table. They were alone in the world, those two. Father and mother sleeping in the vaults of the old church yonder amongst the trees. No nearer relative than a cousin, whom they had never seen; nothing to divide them but their own evil passions and wayward hearts. How they ought to have loved and clung to each other. A flagon stood between them on the supper-table. The wine blushed and sparkled in the glow of sunset. Rufane drank deeply, and with a dogged, sullen air; already his brow was flushed, and his features swollen with his potations. Frank's cup stood untasted before him, and neither spoke a word.

At last the younger brother broke silence with an allusion to their previous conversation—

'Not so much as would purchase a horse and a sword! If I lived you should be repaid with interest. The Ormes have never been unsuccessful soldiers. If I fall, you will be spared the charges to which you are now put for a morsel of food and a cup of wine.'

He spoke in anything but the conciliatory tones of a borrower. There was bitter hatred and keen irony in every compressed syllable.

'You are not obliged to go,' answered the elder, in a cool, careless voice, inexpressibly irritating to the chafing spirit of the boy. 'If you knew your duty you would remain in the station in which you have been placed, therewith to be content. But go or stay, it is no affair of mine. You have your portion; I do not choose to interfere.'

The boy's fury blazed out—

'My portion!' he repeated. 'The wages of a groom or a falconer! No, *brother*, I will *not* be indebted to you; you have said it yourself. Not another morsel will I eat, not another drop will I drink, beneath your roof. This very night I will ride away before the moon is up. I leave you; I despise you; I renounce you. When I have made myself a name, and you come cringing to claim kindred with me, I will abjure you, and proclaim to the world how false-hearted and mean and ungenerous you were.'

He rose while he spoke, but his young heart smote him as he glanced at the old church-tower, and he turned and put out his hand—

'I shall never see you again,' he said, his voice faltering a little, 'so we need not part in anger now. Rufane, do you remember our mother?'

'I do,' answered the other, in the same cold, grating voice, refilling the cup at his elbow the while; 'and how she warned you against that undutiful and rebellious spirit of yours, which was sure to bring you to evil.'

The other ground his teeth and turned upon his heel; but even then his mother's face rose before him; the face he used to drag down with his two little arms so laughingly to meet his own; the face he had seen long ago white and beautiful in its coffin, when he thought his heart was broken for evermore. He looked back, less in anger than reproach—

'I will bear you no malice,' he said. 'Brother, for the last time, Farewell!'

The other lifted his full cup with a sneering smile. 'To our next merry meeting!' he replied, and emptying it at a draught, leaned back in his chair, and closed his eyes either in real or feigned repose.

When he opened them he was alone; and he never saw his brother's face again, but once.

The battle of Worcester was fast degenerating into a rout. The streets of the town were filling with pursuers and pursued. The third Stuart had played his last stake for a crown—and lost. It was a question now of saving the person of the king. Covering his flight, a body of Royalist cavalry made a succession of brilliant and desperate charges, leaving at every fresh effort some Cavalier of name and distinction on the field. In these onsets Frank Orme signalized himself by a headlong gallantry and personal prowess worthy of a disciple of Prince Rupert, and was largely instrumental in checking, though he could not repulse,

the overwhelming squadrons of the Protector. As he made his final effort, which enabled Charles to escape, his horse's bridle was seized by an officer of the enemy's cavalry. His sword was already broken, and quick as lightning he drew a pistol from his holster and shot his assailant through the body. The next instant his charger was clattering masterless up the street, and he was bending in an agony of remorse and horror over the dying man.

Yes, the pale face contracted in its last spasm was no other than Rufane's. All unconsciously in the confusion of the struggle Frank felt his hand was red with a brother's blood. He strove to stanch the wound, but in vain. He strove to wrest a word of reconciliation or pardon from those writhing lips, but the bullet had done its duty too well. Regardless of his own danger, of the king, of the routed army, of everything but the gasping sufferer before him, he implored Rufane but for one word, one token, that should lift the curse from his own head ere his brother passed away. Once he thought the black lips moved, and a stifled murmur seemed to gurgle up through the blood that was choking the fallen man. He bent down and listened with wild terror. He sprang to his feet then and caught a loose horse, and sped away like a madman. Something he had heard froze the very fountain of his heart. He rode as if chased by furies. Shot at by the pursuing Parliamentarians, he seemed to bear a charmed life. And still he galloped on, that awful murmur ringing and surging in his ears. 'To our next merry meeting!' It was not fancy, it was not the trick of memory played on an excited imagination, for he had bent

down to catch his brother's last words, and listened for them as one listens for the sentence of life or death. They were plain enough, though the dying lips moved so faintly, and the whisper was hoarse with exhaustion. Every breeze that swept by repeated them, every stroke of his horse's gallop kept time to the ghastly refrain, 'To our next merry meeting!'

It matters little how he reached Boscobel, and followed the fortunes of his fugitive sovereign, to return with him at the Restoration, and enter in triumph on the goodly inheritance of the Ormes. Remorse has a different effect on different minds. For some, the thorny path leads slowly and painfully up the mountain, to reach the springs of life and hope at last, fresher and purer and more reviving as they gush from the bare granite, than when stealing sluggishly along through the fat pastures of the level valley below. Others it goads downwards into the broad easy road—the descent that grows smoother and steeper at every mile-stone—the journey that can be performed as surely and expeditiously on a cripple's crutches as in a coach-and-six—that terminates at those gates which open wide to receive all comers, but which can be passed but once, for thence there is no return.

Frank Orme—the lord of West-Acres, a king's favourite, a gentleman of name and position—was a very different person from Frank Orme the chafing, discontented, and morose younger brother, yet would he willingly have given all he was worth twice over to be able to undo the deed that had placed him in possession of his present advantages. A curse seemed to hang over him, which neither employment, nor excitement,

nor prosperity could take off. He sat in a corrupt Parliament, and devoted no mean talents to political intrigue and the promptings of ambition in vain. He attended a dissolute Court, and failed to find forgetfulness in the smiles of beauty or the favour of Royalty itself. As a last resource he married. Rather a bad compliment to the lady; but then, as now, the fair sex were not averse to the task of reforming a sinner (*bien entendu* not a sinner in rags, but a sinner in purple). The last effort seemed no whit more successful than its predecessors. There is a picture of the lady and her boy in one of the bed-rooms, a dove-eyed dame with a fair foolish face, and to all appearance her stays *outside* her dress, nursing a curly-headed urchin, who shows no slight resemblance to the stock from which he sprang; the whole depicted under a blue curtain with a crimson sunset in the distance. He did not love the foolish face, but he made it a kind, cold, indifferent husband, and it consoled itself perhaps as best it might, or perhaps it paled and pined and longed in secret, and so grew old before its time. Who knows? It is full two hundred years ago. Who cares? They are hideous ornaments, those stiff family pictures, yet are they suggestive representations nevertheless. Before he was thirty, Frank Orme was a doomed man.

Like many another who looks here and there, before and behind, around and below, everywhere but *above*, for some distraction, some palliative of the pain rankling at his heart, the lord of West-Acres tried the same remedy that might have been selected by any ignorant clown on his estate. Drenched with wine, and maddened with licentious shouting revelry, he could

forget for a few hours; and then, when the spectre drew aside his curtain and woke him to memory, what resource had he but to drown it once again? There must have been something weak in the *morale* of these Ormes. They were a gallant race and a gifted, from father to son, but they seem to have been incapable of facing unaided the misgivings or the sorrows which their own imaginations conjured up. Frank found no pleasure save in these brutal orgies, and it was strange that, to whatever excesses they were carried, he never neglected that parting toast, 'To our next merry meeting!' giving it out with a ghastly mockery of gaiety as if in defiance of some invisible agency, and quaffing off his wine in its honour with the reckless mirth of despair.

By his own desire, and from some morbid feeling which we could not and would not anatomise, he was painted in the act of pledging his accustomed toast. It is probable that the artist whom he employed had assisted him more than once in draining a flagon to do it justice. Time after time were his boon companions half startled, half amused, at the increasing wildness of his voice and gestures when he enunciated the well-known sentence; time after time they winked and shrugged their shoulders, and touched their wine-sodden foreheads with owlish gravity; but those who drink at a man's charges are usually the last to interfere with his whims; and the Ormes were a race that seldom listened to advice, certainly that never brooked reproof.

At last, one afternoon the foolish face, sitting with her child, was startled by a visit from her husband.

He spoke more kindly to her than was his wont, and took more notice of his boy. Then he bade her farewell, 'he was going a journey,' he said, 'not a very long one, yet for which some preparation must be made. He should mount his horse after dinner, to which he had invited a few friends. Life was uncertain: in case of accident, he had come to wish her "Good bye." She had been a good wife to him.'

Emboldened by this unaccustomed tone, the foolish face brightened up, and asked whether she might not take her place at the dinner-table as he was to depart so soon? That handsome brow of his could look very black on occasion. It darkened now as he answered harshly in the negative. But he kissed her on the forehead directly afterwards, and bade her 'Farewell' very kindly once more. Poor woman! she treasured up that caress to her dying day.

Then Frank Orme gathered his boon companions about him, and laugh and shout and song made the rafters ring. At last he pledged them all in a double measure with the well-known toast, 'To our next merry meeting!' crushed the empty cup beneath his heel, and so, without another word, walked to the door, mounted his horse, and was gone.

By midnight, the horse came quietly back to his stable. By noon of the next day a lad found Mr. Orme's hat, gloves, and cloak, under an old oak-tree about two miles from West-Acres. When that lad died a man of fourscore, the master had not returned. His fate has been a mystery ever since. The foolish face mourned for him, they say, and waited long before she married again; and the curly-headed child sat in its

father's chair. Some people affirm that father appears to his descendants even now. I know the late Mr. Orme fancied he saw him more than once, but this was when his mind was failing, and shortly previous to his own decease. It is a queer story. None the less so for the wild expression of the picture. I wonder where he met his brother Rufane, and whether they are reconciled now?

'Uncle Edward, are you not coming?' said a voice at my elbow, 'and how idle you are! A whole morning gone, and not a letter ready for the post.'

Lady Gertrude, in a provoking little hat, was standing by my side. I did not hear her come into the room, so engrossed was I with my meditations.

'I will put them off till to-morrow,' I replied; 'the fact is, my dear, I am getting old and dreamy. I have been thinking of the past, and looking at that picture.'

Her glance followed mine, and for an instant the childish expression of terror came back into her face.

'That picture!' she said, 'I wish they would take it away; I have a horror of it. Oh! Uncle Edward, do you see it too? Is not Gilbert getting like it, especially about the eyes?'

CHAPTER XL.

LADY WILFUL.

IT was a relief to get out of doors. I seemed to breathe more freely in that pure, warm air. The last days of September were going out with the rich tints of autumn and the sunny skies of June. The scarlet geraniums in the flower garden surfeited the eye with their bright masses loading the shaven sward; the tall hollyhocks reared their gaudy rosettes above a splendid confusion of verbena, petunia, anemone, and calceolaria spangled with spots of gold. The pendant fuchsias drooped in their last loveliness, and the sweet heliotrope exhaled her dying fragrance ere she sank to decay. Only the roses were past. All was left that could extort admiration, but the balmy scent that gives its dearest charm to the summer garden was gone with the summer prime. So is it in life. Rich and bright is its meridian splendour—deep are the hues and noble is the beauty of success; but who would not give it all *so* willingly but for one breath of the hopeful sweetness that pervaded those showery mornings in May?

Gertrude was proud of her driving, and not without reason; she managed two high-bred, spirited ponies with considerable skill. We had no servant with us,

as the groom who was to accompany her when she dropped me, had gone on to our trysting place with the sportsmen. As we swept round a turn in the avenue, a deer that had been couching in the fern suddenly sprang to its feet, and bounded across the road immediately in front of the ponies' heads. One of them took fright and tried to turn round. My fair charioteer's brows went down and her lips shut tight as she administered two or three sharp cuts which brought the rebel to obedience, then the pretty face cleared, and she soothed and caressed him with the end of the whip, and spoke to him in gentle conciliatory tones, which the animal seemed perfectly to understand. I wonder if she read my thoughts, for she turned to me with her meaning air, and said,

'Do you remember, Uncle Edward, when you used to call me Lady Wilful, and tell me the fairy tale about what happened to the princess who *would* have her own way?'

'You have yours with the ponies, at any rate,' I replied. 'Your system, I see, is one of rewards and punishments. Do you not think, however, it would be better to try the caresses *first?* Or perhaps you consider they are the more welcome for the flogging that precedes them.'

I think she was answering her own thoughts when she replied, for she looked straight between the ponies' heads far beyond the new lodges which we were rapidly approaching,

'I believe a strong will is best counteracted by a stronger than itself. I believe all creatures, not excepting the human race, are prone to despise the

yielding and to give way before the firm. And yet it is far more painful to insist than to concede. But it never answers to give in, never. Fancy, Uncle Edward, if I had let that pony turn round! why we should have been back at the hall door by this time!'

'And if *he* had insisted,' said I, 'for after all he is much stronger than both of us put together, and you had thought proper to fight it out?'

'Then the carriage would have been broken all to pieces, and you and I had to trudge home on foot. You see somebody *must* get the worst of it!'

This feminine argument was conclusive. I recognised in it the principle that has held the sexes in equipoise so many thousand years. I remembered our mother, and the apple her honest husband would never have dreamed of touching but for her. I did not forget Samson with his head in that coaxing Philistine's lap. A vision came across me of routed legions and galleys scattered like scared water-fowl over the blue southern sea, and frank-hearted Antony destroyed because dark Egypt smiled. It needed not to go back into history to find parallel examples. I thought of many a bright joyous comrade and many a trusty friend. I thought, no I *dared not* think, of the story I knew best of all, but I subscribed sincerely to the sentence, 'Somebody *must* get the worst of it;' and it is not the least generous, the least trusting, the least devoted, that is to 'get the worst.' No; in this, as in other matters, they take sufficient care that the so-called weakest shall *not* go to the wall.

We stopped at the lodges, and inspected the progress that had been already made. We looked down across

the park to where the chimneys and gables of the hall peeped through a mass of towering elms, and a thin smoke curled upward into that blue sky laced with a streak of silvery clouds. The lake at our feet glowed like burnished gold, and the woods beyond seemed sleeping, hushed, and still, in the hot haze of noon. The same thought, I am sure, crossed each of our minds at the same moment. 'To be lord of all this, and not to be happy!' was my inward reflection; and Gertrude, touching the ponies with her whip, broke silence and put the carriage in motion at the same time.

'What a deal Gilbert might do here,' said she, 'if he were only to turn his mind to it; and it would be the best cure for himself at the same time. Uncle Edward, I want to ask your advice. What do you think ought to be done about Gilbert?'

It was a comprehensive question, and she put it with the clear, penetrating look that sat so well on her fair young face. I know not what prompted me to answer as I did. I know not why, being so intimate as I was with both, I should have chosen not to be sure that her feelings towards her cousin were like those of a sister for a brother, scarcely less, certainly not more. I looked full into her eyes as I replied,

'He ought to marry; I see no other chance of saving him from everything that is worst.'

'Ah! if he would do that,' said she, with the same clear, bright look, 'it would make us all so happy. But do you think there is any hope of it? Are you sure if he *did*, he would not make bad worse? I thought you were more or less romantic than the rest of us, Uncle Edward, and did not consider marriage

the universal panacea for improvement when everything else has failed.'

She read my thoughts pretty clearly. I have never lowered the richest blessing earth can bestow to a mere remedy for dissipation, never looked upon the troth-plight of a pure and loving woman as the safety-valve that shall possibly check the excesses of a wild young man.

'If he married some one who could guide as well as interest him,' was my answer, 'whom he respected as well as loved, I do believe that even now it would not be too late. Such a wife would make him a different being here and hereafter. You know as well as I do how much good there is about Gilbert, how generous and forgiving he is, how sensitive to kindness, how easily led by his affections.'

The bright eyes were filling fast with tears, but the little hands guided the driving-reins to an inch. Old fool that I was! I must needs put my oar into waters already sufficiently troubled. I who ought to have known, who did know, that it was simply impossible, must needs subscribe for the moment to the conclusions of the gossiping circle of relatives and friends, who dispose in theory of the feelings and affections as readily as of the prospects and fortunes of another.

'I only know *one* person,' I resumed, 'who has it in her power to rescue Gilbert now. I wish I was as sure of her willingness as her ability.'

I looked straight in her face while I spoke. She met my eye quite calmly; not a shade of confusion darkened her fair open brow, but there was something bitter and unhappy about the expression of her mouth as she replied,

'I know what you mean, Uncle Edward, but it will never be. Once, I grant you, it was not impossible. Now it is completely out of the question. Dear Gilbert! how happy he would be with any one who was really fond of him, and how happy *she* would be too. Where shall we find the Princess, Uncle Edward? Is she coming, think you, in a coach-and-six with outriders, like Cinderella at eleven o'clock at night, or in rags and tatters, like poor Cinderella at one in the morning? I think, if I know my cousin, the rags will have it. I wish I could see her, though, whether she came in pattens or glass slippers! As for me,' she added, brightening up, with a joyous sunshiny look that did my heart good ('steady ponies! I won't have you start off because you hear a shot fired), as for me, I shall never marry, but remain Lady Wilful to the end of the chapter.'

'We like you very much as you are,' was my reply, as the carriage stopped at the turn down Marigold-lane, and we espied the three sportsmen wading knee-deep in a field of swedes; 'but you would not be a woman if you were not liable to change your mind; and it don't follow that because you promise some deluded victim to *obey* him, you should not continue to be Lady Wilful afterwards just the same.'

She was not listening to me, for just then a brace of partridges got up before John Gordon, and he shot them right and left.

What fun they had in that field of swedes. How they traversed it backwards and forwards, length-wise, and cross-wise, up and down, and beat it every inch. How steady was that sagacious old pointer, whose duties

were limited to the quest after dead game and baffling pursuit of 'runners,' of which I am bound to say there were indeed but few. The three gentlemen were no uncertain shots, and so surely as the russet partridge whirred up from its variegated covert, so surely it went down, shot dead and true, before one or other of those unerring barrels. How grim and unmoved was the broad-shouldered keeper. An institution at West-Acres was that man of superhuman gravity, who was never known to smile, but who entered into every detail of his profession with a reverent earnestness as of one who lived for nothing else in the world. He was not without a sort of dry humour, nevertheless, and a *bon-mot* of Orme's old keeper had even found its way to the clubs in St. James's-street. It was produced at Flippant's expense, who, although a deadly shot, had suffered a woodcock to escape him whilst draining his sherry flask in the middle ride of West-Acres Wood on occasion of a large battue, and was ever afterwards spoken of by the keeper as 'the London gentleman as didn't seem to take much notice.'

How the stable boy in the rear, ordered out on a young horse for the purpose of 'marking' the wilder coveys, scampered hither and thither. Not doing much in the way of observation, certainly, but finishing countless imaginary Derbys and St. Legers, with his hands down, his feet rammed home in the stirrups, to his own boundless satisfaction, and the general agitation and discomfiture of the young horse.

How another assistant, following with beer, made repeated applications to that fluid, till his face shone rubicund under the influence of its own innate health,

combined with a mild stage of intoxication, and exposed to a broiling sun.

How John Gordon walked untiring, with his iron muscles and his indefatigable stride, and rarely missed and never smiled; how Gilbert, with his light springy step, and a certain grace of gesture which never left him, reminded me of the Gilbert of old times; and lastly, how cheery and gladsome was Holyhead's manly face as he sprang over the fence into the lane, and announced his delight at our arrival, and the extreme rapacity of his inner man for the good things with which we had come provided.

'Two-and-thirty brace, Lady Gertrude!' exclaimed the peer in triumph; 'and the practice, though I say it that shouldn't, remarkably accurate. Do you know, Gordon has scarcely missed a shot the whole morning. We've all done well, and now exhausted nature must sink without supplies. What have you brought? Sandwiches! good! Cold pie! good! Sherry! *very* good! *And* a bottle of claret. My old friend at my elbow again! Lady Gertrude, you come like the Goddess of Plenty to the thirstiest of your worshippers. Here's your good health.'

Holyhead drained his glass with exceeding goodwill, applying himself thereafter to the pie with an earnestness that stopped his mouth for a season most effectually.

In the meantime Gilbert and Gordon had laid their guns aside, and came up to the pony carriage to welcome its inmates and its provisions, though with far less energy than their demonstrative companion. My boy looked more like himself than I had seen him for a

long time. His eye was bright with the excitement of the sport, and hard exercise had brought a healthy colour to his cheek, but I listened in vain for the good-humoured banter and flow of lively, fanciful conversation which used to make him the life and soul of a party like the present. Alas! a ribald sentiment or a bitter sarcasm was the nearest approach to mirth that ever now crossed the lips of Gilbert Orme. John's talent for silence, too, had wonderfully increased of late, particularly in Lady Gertrude's presence. Formerly they were never tired of appealing to each other on the most trivial subjects, and would wrangle good humouredly upon every possible topic from morning till night; now they only exchanged words when it was unavoidable, and even then I could not help remarking that their eyes never met. It was for Holyhead to keep us all in good spirits. He had already discussed a capital luncheon, and whilst he puffed at his cigar was deep in an argument with Lady Gertrude upon the charms of partridge-shooting. His was one of those enviable dispositions which take their most vivid colouring from the objects immediately surrounding them. Holyhead was always engrossed with the present occupation or amusement. If he was hunting, life seemed to have nothing to offer equal to the stride of a good horse and the pace of a pack of fox-hounds. If he was deer-stalking, the essence of poetry and delight was comprised in the dim mountain and the distant herd, the deep corrie, and the wreathing mist rising like a curtain from the black fastnesses of the glen. In salmon fishing he vowed there was no music to him like the spin of a reel, and the swirl of a rushing stream;

whilst of all sports in the world, he declared to-day, none could vie with such a morning's shooting and such a luncheon as the present.

Lady Gertrude admitted the merits of the luncheon, 'but surely,' said she, 'you don't call this like being on a highland hill, up to your knees in heather, with fifty brace of grouse in the creels?'

'Infinitely superior,' answered Holyhead, with a vigorous application to the claret; 'I cannot admit the comparison. Look at the variety of a day's shooting in a low country. The constant change of scene—the snug farm on the rising ground—the pretty village in the valley—the rich autumnal woods to back those slopes of bright yellow and intense green. Luxuriant hedgerows everywhere—a gleaming river gliding peacefully to the sea through a perfect wilderness of beauty in the distance, and—Lady Gertrude with her pony-carriage for a foreground!'

We all applauded his lordship's eloquence. Gilbert slapped him on the back, quoting at the same time the words put into Balaam's mouth by a certain French philosopher, 'Mon âne parle, et même il parle bien.' Gertrude laughed, and vowed she could not dispute the merits of the last feature in the landscape, 'but you might have that in the Highlands equally well,' she added.

'You wouldn't look half so nice as you do now,' objected the energetic peer, 'not a bit of it! You'd be dressed in that hideous grey stuff, to begin with. Then you'd be on a shaggy brute of a pony, horribly disordered and *décoiffée* with what they call mountain breezes there, and *we* should term a gale of wind any-

where else. Also, such a hat as *that* wouldn't stand the climate a day. No, with these disadvantages, even *you* could not carry off the general gloom of the scene. Then think of those eternal tracts of moor. You are romantic, ladies always are, but you don't like sameness, ladies never do. Now, that's what I object to in grouse-shooting—the same scenery—the same objects, or rather the same want of objects—the same grey—the same brown—the same purple—the same blue. 'Pon my life, it's almost as bad as the sea. Yes, it's just one degree better than yachting. I appeal to both of you fellows, now, as men who are above prejudice. Were you not always the least thing bored with grouse-shooting by the end of the third day?'

'But then we hadn't Gertrude with us,' said Gilbert, whereat I remarked one gentleman of the party wince ever such a little, though his dark face varied not at all. I think she observed it too, for she addressed him for the first time.

'I hear you have been shooting very well, Mr. Gordon. I hope *you* like West-Acres better than Scotland?'

One moment the whole iron face softened, till its expression was almost beautiful; the next, the mask was on again as tight as ever.

'Even *without* the foreground,' he answered, very low, and with a cold, distant bow that was almost rude.

The others had gone to resume their guns, and I was getting out of the carriage, so I think she fancied the whisper was unobserved in which she replied, 'Thank you for the compliment; you are sincere, at any rate.'

And I am sure no one but myself heard John's muttered, 'God help me! I *am*,' with which he strode over the fence into the adjoining field.

Lady Gertrude drove off for the railway station at a pace of unusual liberality, and John Gordon missed the first three consecutive shots which offered themselves, to the astonishment and disgust of the keeper at his side.

I walked behind the sportsmen, enjoying the freshness of the air and the contemplation of a pastime that I had followed in youth with passionate eagerness. When a man has once cared for field sports, I confess I am always sorry to see him losing his taste for these manly pursuits. I mean when they come in his way naturally and easily. I have remarked that it argues either failing energy or too great a preponderance of one engrossing idea, than which nothing is more fatal to the *morale* of the individual. I believe *balance* to be one of the great secrets for preserving a well-regulated mind. One who can interest and occupy himself with what are called *trifles*, has a great advantage over another who must be at 'high pressure,' so to speak, to work at all. The former can keep his faculties in edge and polish by frequent and judicious use, the latter must wear them away with too much friction, or leave them to lie on the shelf and rust.

As I watched Gilbert, I was concerned to see the listlessness of his bearing, and his mere *endurance* of what used to be one of his keenest pleasures. He was such a contrast to his two companions, for Holyhead, it is needless to observe, was an enthusiastic sportsman,

while John Gordon, though never to be betrayed into anything like undue triumph or excitement, had still a strong zest for any task which required the slightest amount of skill or perseverance, and consistently carried out the precept of Solomon, 'Whatsoever thine hand findeth to do, that do with thy might.'

Nevertheless, field after field was beat; covey after covey flushed, marked, broken, and destroyed. John Gordon had recovered his equanimity and the accuracy of his practice. Holyhead was beginning to complain of 'that deathless thirst of his.' There were fifty-two brace in the bag; the dews were falling rapidly, and a vapoury haze was rising from the teeming soil. Heavy banks of clouds tipped with crimson were settling over the western sky; the partridges were calling to each other from stubble to stubble; and even the keeper thought it was time 'to give out,' as he termed it. The sportsmen handed their guns to their attendants, and striking into the high road, made for the park. Gilbert remained behind to give a few directions as to the disposal of some game, and the other two walked on at a pace that seemed to me peculiarly unsuitable after a hard day's work. Perhaps each had some restless reason of his own for wishing to get back to the Hall. I also had an object to pursue. I had determined to obtain an hour's quiet conversation with my boy. We were soon strolling along between the high thick hedges, out of sight and ear-shot of all but the quiet hares and busy rabbits that stole out of the plantations to crop their dank evening meal.

Like many other 'pleasant vices,' smoking has given

me up for years. Nevertheless, on occasion I hold the composing weed to be of great assistance to those who would invite confidence or unbosom themselves of their sorrows. Gilbert smiled as he handed me a cigar. For several minutes we walked on and smoked without a word.

CHAPTER XLI.

'A DAY THAT IS DEAD.'

I WAS the first to break silence.

'Gilbert,' I said, 'I fear I shall have to go soon. I can only spare time for a short visit. When shall I see you again? What are you going to do all the winter?'

I confess to the common weakness of humanity that shrinks from entering at once upon a painful subject. I know I am wrong, but I cannot help, as it were, putting forth my foot and testing the temperature of the bath, to withdraw it again shrinkingly, and prepare, not without a shiver, for another attempt, rather than souse in at once over head and ears, and come up with a glow. Therefore, I tried to lead Gilbert on to a confession by degrees.

He started as though I had touched upon some subject which even then occupied his mind.

'Go abroad, I think,' he answered with rather a disturbed look: 'to Egypt, or South America, or any other warm climate. What does it matter? What can I do here?'

'Shall you not stay at West-Acres,' I resumed, 'now you are settled here? at least till the end of the hunting season?'

He laughed bitterly, launching at once into the savage tone which was habitual now, which he never used formerly.

'And fulfil my duties, I suppose, in the station in which I am placed! Ride half-bred horses over this break-neck country, and come home in the dark to dine with a few respectable idiots who haven't an idea beyond the fat on my venison and the taste of my claret. Then once a week I should attend magistrates' meetings, and commit poor fellows to prison that I know are ten times better and honester men than myself! Thank you, my dear old friend. What a life you would chalk out for me!'

'I *am* an old friend,' I said, gravely, 'and that is why I am talking to you now. Think how ninety-nine men out of every hundred would envy you your lot.'

As I spoke we met one of his own labourers returning from work. His tools hung in a basket behind him, his coarse clothes and gaiters were plastered with mud, his red handkerchief, limp with toil, was knotted loosely round his weather-beaten neck. The man was obviously tired and hungry and poor, yet while we passed him he wished us a kindly 'Good-night,' and whistled cheerfully as he stepped out on his homeward way.

Gilbert pointed over his shoulder with the loading-rod in his hand.

'I would give everything I have,' he said, 'willingly —oh! *how* willingly!—to whistle with as light a heart as that fellow, even for a day.'

There was something so utterly hopeless and spirit-broken in his tone that I could hold out no longer.

'My boy,' I said, 'you are very, very unhappy. I

have known it, I have seen it, for long. Such a grief as yours, hidden and cherished and brooded over, eats like a sore into the heart. Like a sore, too, it should be opened and fomented and encouraged to run freely till it drains itself away. Will you not confide in me? Will you not take counsel with me? I have known you from a child. I have watched over you all your life. Gilbert, I love you like a son.'

He took my arm and pressed it in his own kindly manner.

'If you know it,' he said, 'it is no use my telling you. But you are right, Uncle Edward, I need not mind acknowledging to *you* that I am very miserable. It cannot be unmanly to speak the truth; and if it be so, what need that matter to me? I have nothing to care for, nothing to hope for, on earth. You cannot conceive how I loathe the wealth and the position and the luxury by which people set such store. What can they do for me? How can they help me? They do but give me facilities for evil; and I rush into guilt, not blindly—that might be excusable—but wilfully, and with open eyes, knowing it cannot make me forget even for an hour! I sometimes wonder why are these things so. I begin to doubt Wisdom and Truth, above all, *Justice*. Am I expiating crimes committed in a past state, of which I have no remembrance? Or am I punished for the venial follies of my youth, in which even now I can see but little harm? What is it I have done? or what is the object and the intention of making me so unhappy? I try to look at the whole question with the eye of an unprejudiced observer; to be myself the unshrinking anatomist of my

own moral being—to abstract my own identity from the sufferer, and watch the fibres quiver and the nerves thrill with calm scientific interest. You see I go rather deep into the thing,' he added, with a painful attempt at levity, 'and the only conclusion I arrive at is the somewhat inconclusive one—*Cui bono?*'

'You do not take the right view of it,' I argued. 'How can you look dispassionately on your own sufferings? And when was cold philosophy sufficient to console a man for any sorrows but those of others? *Cui bono?* you ask. Did you ever hear of a prize without a struggle? Can you not conceive that the furnace must be heated sevenfold to temper the true steel? Gilbert, the time will come when you will thank God that you have been in trouble!'

'And you mean to tell me that all this is for my own good!' he broke in. 'To put me off with the old woman's argument that wretchedness here necessarily implies happiness hereafter. I dispute the whole principle. I maintain that if there is any scheme at all, man is intended to be happy both in this world and the next—that the very affections which constitute the blessings of earth fit him best for heaven. And what of him who is to lose both?—who feels as I do, too painfully, that he has been deprived in this life of that for which the next, whatever it may be, can offer him no equivalent? But on questions such as these no two people can agree. You have not felt as I have, Uncle Edward; I cannot expect you to think as I do.'

I have always been of opinion that a grain of illustration is worth a pound of argument. We were still half-an-hour's walk from the Hall. Evening had

already closed in. Time and place were equally adapted for confidential communication.

'You doubt my experiences,' I said; 'would you like to hear something of them? You have known me as long as you have known anything. Do you ever remember me different from what I am now?'

He smiled as he answered,

'No. My impression of you from the first is the same kind dear old Uncle Edward, with the same white hair, and the same absent ways, and I firmly believe the very same clothes that you have got on to-day.'

'A sort of old man of the sea,' I replied, 'who clung to you so tight that you never could shake him off. I wonder you were not afraid of him as a child, that Ancient Mariner—

> So long, and lank, and brown,
> As is the ribbed sea-sand.

Ah! Gilbert, I have never told you before; I will tell you now, almost in the Ancient Mariner's words—

> Oh! wedding-guest this soul hath been
> Alone on a wide, wide sea;
> So lonely 't was that God himself
> Scarce seemed there to be.

The sea is lonely as ever, but it is not so wide now; and I think I know that God is often nearer poor Hagar in the wilderness than mocking Sarah smiling at the tent-door, surrounded by flocks and herds, asses and camels, and all the profusion of the Patriarch's wealth. Think of that desolate one as she sat down on the barren sand, a bow-shot off from her child that

she might not see him die. It was not till she had abandoned her very last hope that the spring bubbled up, and they were saved. Will you hear how it was with me before you were born?

'It may seem strange to you that the quiet old book-worm whom you remember making your bows and arrows as a child, and reading Herodotus with you as a youth, should ever have been, like yourself, a man of the world, worldly, mixing in all the sports and vanities that are so engrossing at the time, and draining the cup of pleasure with a zest of which even the memory carries with it a species of intoxication still. He was rich, gay, agreeable—he may say so now without vanity—and above all, thoroughly in earnest. Whatever promised amusement or excitement, he pursued and ran down with unfailing energy. Aye, it's no use disguising it, you know it as well as I do—pleasure, empty though it be, is a very pleasant thing while it lasts. We have read of the Cups of Circe, you and I, in the old peaceful days. Depend upon it they were no insipid draught. Cold, sweet, and sparkling, be sure they never lost their flavour till they had produced their effect. Ah! with the strength and skill of manhood in one's limbs, and the hot blood of manhood boiling at one's heart, it was no tame pastime to sweep along on a high-couraged hunter over fence and field, racing with half-a-dozen of the wildest and merriest of one's friends; no wearisome task to watch far into the night, quaffing the blushing claret, with thick-coming fancies crowding in the brain on the generous flood, and the charms of wit, and friendship, and poetry, and romance, brought out as the varnish brings out the

colours of a picture, in each of the brave, thoughtless, high-spirited comrades who sat around. Why need I dwell on all that life offers to the rich and gay? The succession of sports, the crowded race-course with its rush of horses, its Babel of tongues, and its flower-show of beauty; the solitary heather-bed amongst the dark hills that lower round Ben-y-Glo; the wild wave surging up so fresh and free from the bows of the gliding cutter, steadying bravely to the breeze; above all, the pleasant voices of women, the ringing laugh, the merry eye, and the intoxicating smile. You have done it all; you have tried it all. You have been through the charmed circle; you cannot deny it. It was a gleaming fairy-land once, for all it is such a waste of desert now. Well, Gilbert, I have trodden the same path before you; I am ashamed to think how well I liked it. But the time came at last when I began to deem all this sparkle and glitter less the end than the accessories of existence. When I esteemed such but as the stones of lesser price, that I would fain group around the pearl I thought I had won. Nay, when I flung them away willingly, cheerfully, that the pearl might show fairer, purer, without the aid of extraneous ornament. Then I said I have found the philosopher's stone at last. What need I care that I melt all my possessions in the crucible, since I have worked out the charm that turns everything to gold? Why should I grudge to abstract myself from all I have hitherto esteemed, and give up friends, ambition, fame, station, all and everything, since I have discovered the pearl of great price, which, when a man finds, he sells all he has that he may make it his

own? I was *really* happy now—so I thought, and so I *was*—for about half a day! It is no less sad than true, Gilbert; and you will, I feel, agree with me, that this false glamour is a warmer, softer light than the pure, clear dawn of the true day. Alas! instead of growing brighter and brighter into the splendour of noon, that it should fade as rapidly as a meteor, and leave us in a darkness all the more profound that our eyes have been dazzled, and our senses stupefied, with its sheen.

'I set my pearl in gold, if ever man did. The gem was well worthy of the setting. I am an old man now. Boy! I cannot but be within a few paces of my grave. Years have gone by since then; years that have changed everything around me. And yet I *dare* not speak to-day of the great sorrow that passed over me and left me desolate.

'Do you think I cared for worldly ruin after that? Do you think the choicest gifts of fortune could have ever again been to me aught but dust and ashes? The greatest kindness you can bestow on the poor wretch who has taken his death-wound, is to lay him down in some quiet corner unnoticed and alone.

'These things are managed for us. It *must* be so, or the memories of threescore years and ten would drive a good man mad. Let me look calmly back down the long valley, and think of what *might* have been. Had I retained all the treasures men most covet, health, and wealth, and strength, and station, aye, and the one inestimable blessing that alone made them all worth having, how could I have borne to think of Death? Too happy for a mortal, I must have become a coward

from sheer fulness of content. Again, had I not been compelled to face actual want alone, how would it have racked my heart to see *her* in poverty and distress? On the other hand, to have lost the jewel and preserved the setting, would have been to sit with folded hands in the mute prostration of despair. But when all was lost, then was it all was gained. It is well to have but one Friend left, the only Friend that never failed a man at his need. There He is, always the same, always generous, always sympathizing, always forgiving; not grudging that you never come to Him till every one else has spurned you; accepting your broken heart all the more kindly that it is broken and humbled to the dust. Oh! my boy, if the heathen thought he was sure of one last resource in death, what courage does it give *us* to know that we have *our* refuge in life for ever!'

Gilbert shook his head. He was dissatisfied still. How I wished for 'the tongue of men and angels' to win him over to my side. But there was a drop of bitterness in his heart that turned all his better feelings to gall.

'Yours is a sad story,' he said, 'but I dare say there are many such in the world, though few have borne the load so gently and bravely as my old friend. Do not think, however, that it is any consolation to me to lament and whine over so common an infliction as mine. On the contrary, I wish, as I have already told you, to look on the whole thing as a physiological study. It is rather amusing than otherwise. You know the facts; I need not go over them. You know what I felt for her. Oh God! you know how I loved her! (it was sad

how his voice changed), and by this time you must know the return she has made me for all *I* could give. The thing is almost absurd enough to stand for a joke. If the devil ever laughs,—and I am sure he must often have cause,—it is enough to make him hold his sides. Well may he jibe and jeer at those who do his work without even receiving his wages. I laugh at it myself, when I am alone. And yet what would I not have sacrificed, what *did* I not sacrifice for *her?* I asked for so little in return. Had she but loved me, I should have lived all my life true and self-denying for her sake. I would not even have asked to see her, or be near her, but I would have heard from time to time of her welfare, and so toiled on, hoping to meet her in another world. Is this high and holy affection, or is it stark madness? What has been my reward? She drops me with as little effort as it takes to pull off a pair of soiled gloves, and when I am dying she never comes near me to know how I am!'

He spoke with a degree of bitterness that was painful to hear. It was clear he knew nothing of Ada's visit to his sick chamber. My gentle, soft-hearted Ada, who would have given her life only too happily to have saved his. It seemed cruel he should so misunderstand her. After a moment's silence he went on again.

'This it is that galls me so. I can sometimes hardly endure it. This it is that makes me a morose, and savage, and miserable man. I could have borne anything better than this. Rather would I have lost her a thousand times, than feel that she is so unworthy, that I have been wasting my whole being on a myth, on an

idea, on that which never had an existence. That the Ada whom I worshipped so fondly was false, heartless, fickle, and unfeeling as the veriest *coquette* that ever sold herself for the miserable triumph of a day!'

I could bear it no longer. To hear her so misjudged, so reviled, and by *him* of all men on earth!

'Hold, Gilbert,' I said, 'had you seen her as I did, when you were insensible in London, and she came to take her last look of you on earth, you would not speak of her as you do now.'

Fool that I was, I had better have bit my tongue out by the roots, than have let him guess at the reality of that touching interview.

He seized me by the arm, and looked wildly into my face, 'Did she come to me?' he said, in a low choking voice; 'oh God! she loves me still!'

We were entering the house while he spoke. He hurried away with staggering, uncertain steps, and I heard the lock of his door turned when he reached his room.

CHAPTER XLII.

WILL YOU?

DINNER that day was rather a tedious affair. Our host did not appear; nor was this an unusual practice with Gilbert of late. The *very* fine gentleman who condescended to officiate as Groom of the Chambers, and who was chiefly remarkable for the elegance with which he turned his periods, and the perseverance with which he pulled down his wristbands, announcing to us that 'Mr. Orme begged we would not wait. He had given orders not to be disturbed. Mr. Orme had a large amount of business to transact against post time.' So we paired off and rustled into dinner without him.

Bella seemed the liveliest of the party. Lady Gertrude, I could not but observe, was exceedingly uneasy; and John Gordon very much out of spirits and out of humour. Lady Olivia was disturbed about some shortcomings of her maid. Holyhead was quieter and more subdued than his wont, though still by no means a dull companion; and I myself, I must confess, felt oppressed by many vague and painful misgivings which I should have been at a loss to explain.

Miss Jones, however, was quite lively and talkative. This young lady was considerably improved by the mis-

fortunes through which she had passed. Her somewhat hoydenish manner had acquired repose and dignity, without losing its frankness. Her tone was softened, and her bearing more self-restrained. She was a woman now; and one who had not only learned to depend on herself, but to act for others. Even her very appearance was changed, and, to my thinking, vastly for the better. She had lost the *beauté de diable*, the only beauty, by the way, to which she could lay claim; but she had gained in its stead a depth of expression, and a defined characteristic cast of countenance, well worth all the red-and-white in the world. I do not think I was the only person present of this opinion.

I do not set up, like many gentlemen of my age and habits, for a consummate judge of beauty. It is perhaps a subject on which study is by no means beneficial, and even in theory admits of every variety of taste and opinion. I do know one man, and that by no means an impressionable person, on whom an impediment in the female speech (doubtless a rare defect, and not without its advantages) produces instantaneous subjection. Stoically uninfluenced by regularity of features, adamant to complexion and *crinoline*, his defences fall to the abortive music of 'a stutter,' as the walls of Jericho crumbled at the trumpet-blast of the hosts of Israel. He is fascinated, conquered, bound hand and foot, before the fair mute can get out her offer of quarter. The one hesitates, and the other is lost. I only adduce this in corroboration of a proverb which exists in every known language, to the effect that 'there is no accounting for tastes.'

To my mind, our young English ladies are very

tardy in reaching their prime. They do not usually get rid of their 'baby-faces' till person and intellect have for some years arrived at the stage of womanhood; and beautiful as those 'baby-faces' unquestionably are, I think most men will admit that time and experience, while altering their expression, rather add to than detract from their charms. In the south of Europe, twenty-five or thirty is synonymous with decay. A transatlantic beauty is in the splendour of her prime at eighteen. Our Saxon cousins, with their fair hair and blue eyes, commonly grow so fat in their sixth lustre, as to lose all pretensions to admiration: whilst a Frenchwoman's teeth rarely withstand the influence of the *bonbonnière* for half-a-dozen years after her marriage. It is only our English dames, I think, who, thanks to their climate, constitution, food, and habits, preserve their beauty unimpaired up to the very verge of middle age. Bella was yet a long way from that somewhat uncertain period; nevertheless she was acquiring expression of countenance and fascination of manner day by day. She was quite capable now of taking her part in the emptiest conversation—than which I hold no accomplishment more denotes familiarity with society—and brought us down the very latest London gossip, which at the end of September, it is fair to conclude, was more likely to originate at Brighton than in the deserted city itself.

'Mrs. Montpellier was at the Old Steine. Mrs. Montpellier had called upon her. She had a piece of news especially for Lord Holyhead—Mrs. Montpellier had refused Charley Wing.'

Holyhead looked excessively conscious, though doubtless every one present mistook the cause.

'How very strange,' said he, with a forced laugh. 'Such a *parti* for a widow. You know Charley is smothered in money now. What can she be about? She must be waiting for a Rothschild.'

'I don't think Mr. Wing can be very rich,' observed Bella. 'I saw him one day walking on the chain pier in *such* shabby clothes, and with a cotton umbrella!'

'That's a sure proof of wealth,' remarked John Gordon. 'Capitalists always carry cotton umbrellas; I know it's so in the City. A very neat article, we consider, looks like borrowing money. I speak as a professional man.'

We laughed; and I remarked a smile on the staid countenance of the Groom of the Chambers, *ex officio* a close observer of men and manners.

'He's very good-looking,' said Miss Jones, simply, still harping on Charley Wing; 'if he would only dress himself a little better; but I suppose Mrs. Montpellier don't think so.'

'Is that *really* your opinion?' asked Lord Holyhead, uneasily; then added with his frank laugh, 'Ah, Miss Jones, you should have seen him in his palmy days, when he had n't a sixpence. He was the smartest and best-looking fellow about London then.'

'Gilbert used always to call him the Last of the Lady-killers,' remarked Gertrude. 'How amused he will be to hear of his rebuff. I have often heard him declare he should be more afraid of Charley Wing as a rival than anybody in the world.'

'He mustn't say so again,' interposed Holyhead, mischievously. 'I believe it is nobody *but* Gilbert that has cut out Charley with Mrs. Montpellier.'

'What nonsense! Gilbert never thought of her!' exclaimed Lady Gertrude, with flashing eyes and uncalled-for energy. 'I mean,' she added, calming suddenly down as if a little ashamed of her vehemence, 'it is so hard that people never *can* be *friends* without the world putting the most uncharitable constructions.'

Her ladyship's unqualified denial did not fail to produce its effect. The servants looked startled; Lady Olivia displeased; Holyhead amused; and John Gordon's brow grew darker and darker. When the ladies rose *en masse* to take flight, he did not even stoop to pick up the gloves and handkerchief which Gertrude had of course suffered to escape below the table. I was forced to dive for them myself, no easy task for an old man after dinner; and though she thanked me kindly for the recovery of these superfluities, I do not think she was conscious of a syllable she said.

Soon after her departure, John thought proper to repeat his previously-announced intention of starting by the early train next morning. Holyhead suddenly sank into a very unusual fit of abstraction, in which he not only forgot to pass the bottle, but neglected to fill his own glass. The consumption of claret was moderate in the extreme; and the bell that summoned coffee was felt to be a relief to all.

In the drawing-room matters were even worse. Lady Olivia had gone to bed with a head-ache—the only indisposition to which her strong organization was subject, and which was apt to come on when she was tired of

her company. Gertrude, looking extremely restless and anxious, had taken a cup of tea to Gilbert's door. Miss Jones chatted on pleasantly enough for a time, chiefly to the edification of Lord Holyhead, who seemed never tired of asking news about her papa, her cottage, her parrot, and her pianoforte. On the three former topics they were growing quite confidential. She had told him that papa was getting better every day, and was a different man since he had escaped from the constant annoyances and anxieties of business; that he got his rubber four nights a week; and that she herself played 'double-dummy' with him the other two. That the little house was very comfortable. She even described the situation of the rooms, and the pattern of the drawing-room carpet. That the parrot liked his new quarters as well as the rest of the family, and had 'quite left off biting people,' added Bella with a blush and a smile. And then she checked his lordship's explosions of hilarity, and his assurances that he should bear the scars to his grave, by an allusion to the comfort she had derived from the possession of the pianoforte at the worst stage of their misfortunes, and her gratitude for the kindness and forethought which had provided her with the instrument.

'I never found out,' said Bella, in a much lower and rather unsteady voice, 'whose gift it was till John told me about it at Brighton. I had almost made up my mind to write and thank you, but I thought I had better wait till I should see you to express my gratitude; and now I hardly know how to do so strongly enough. It was very, *very* kind of you, Lord Holyhead,' said Bella, and the black eyes filled with tears,

though she tried hard to smile. 'You must be a conjuror. You must have known exactly what I wanted, or you must have taken a great deal of trouble to find out.'

'I have thought of little else for many months,' he whispered, in a very low voice, not much steadier than her own; and I confess at this juncture I began to consider whether a third person must not be rather in the way. Gertrude had not returned from her mission with the tea. Gordon was in the little drawing-room, as it was called, obviously reading the paper, to judge by the irritable crackling of the broadsheet. Besides myself, these two were the only inhabitants of the apartment, and they seemed to be quite forgetful of my presence, so engrossed were they with the absorbing topic which some one has described as 'talking *to* each other *of* each other.' Old gentlemen are all very well in their way, but if they are dense and inconsiderate they may sometimes be very much in the way of other people. I began to think I had better penetrate into the library; *that* was my natural sphere now. There was not much temptation to remain with John Gordon in the retreat he had selected, and I caught myself repeating the '*Me nec femina nec puer*' of Horace as I sat me down to a stiffish page of *Diodorus Siculus* which had long puzzled me, but of which that evening I certainly failed to extract the meaning.

No! I do *not* think I would have it all over again if I could. '*Otium Divos rogat in patenti.*' How that Horace keeps running in my head! but surely Rest, Rest is what poor mortality must yearn for, after all. It is better to lie still, though it be down fathom-

deep below the dark waters, than to be ever heaving to and fro, the sport of the changing wave. No more fair breezes and smiling skies and purple islands studding the smooth sheen of the tropic sea; but then no more treacherous fogs and hidden reefs and sudden squalls and long-continued gales to baffle the bold mariner, and vex and weary and make him long for any port at last. No more joyous chorus round the capstan, nor pleasant carouse with jolly messmates on Saturday nights; but then no more turning up all hands to shorten sail in the night, with the sea washing heavily over the slippery deck, and the bare spars dancing and reeling aloft against the cheerless, windy, starry sky. The mariner is down in the sea-caves, wrapped in his clean hammock, with a round shot at his feet. There let him sleep sound and still till the resurrection. He is better so.

Once it crossed my mind as I turned over the pages of *Diodorus Siculus*, that a lady of whom I had heard as the Signora Bravoura might be somewhat dissatisfied with the arrangements so obviously impending. How that strong-minded vocalist herself, or any of her fashionable friends, would have laughed at my being so much behindhand in the gossip of the world. They had parted months ago; and from what I have heard of the lady, it was by no means the least courageous act of his lordship's life thus to free himself from a captivity that was growing more hopeless day by day.

With all the intuitive tact and administrative powers of the female intellect, there are some characters of the other sex, and those not the least capable, in the man-

agement of which women find themselves completely at fault. To soothe the hasty, to cajole the obstinate, to flatter and impose upon the vain, or with honied accents and specious eloquence to mystify the weak,—what advocate so successful as a woman? But there is one class of disposition she usually mistakes, which baffles her persuasive powers, and before which her boasted influence is swept away like a mesh of cobwebs. It is that of a frank, good-humoured, single-hearted, yet resolute man. His very absence of cunning foils all her tactics. He cannot be made to understand her hidden interpretations — her tortuous schemes — her pretty little affectations and harmless duplicity—the shaft that would sting a more artificial heart to the quick, rebounds innocuous from the stainless shield of honesty. There can be no trial of fence where one declines to use the small sword, and falsehood, with all its speed, has so much lost ground continually to make up, that it can never reach the goal so soon as truth. Beat from her usual mode of warfare by such an opponent, the fair aggressor is prone to mistake forbearance for weakness and patience for stupidity. Then she falls into a fatal error, and elects to try the issue by sheer strength. He has borne a good deal. He will bear just a little, *ever* such a little, more. You are bad handicappers, ladies! Ask your brothers or your husbands if it is not that last pound which turns the triumph of Newmarket to a defeat none the less ruinous that it was within a yard of victory? Be advised by me. If you have half reclaimed your falcon, be careful how you abuse the obedience of that tameless nature. Ruffle its feathers but once too often,

and the bird breaks away from wrist and jesses never to stoop to the lure again.

Bravoura was a lady of considerable physical calibre. Deep-bosomed as Juno, ox-eyed also like the mother of the gods, and, not to speak it disrespectfully, a little bull-throated. The price of stalls and boxes on her benefit nights sufficiently vouched for the power of her lungs, and her servants and courier could answer for her high courage and temper to correspond. She feared nobody on earth but Holyhead, and she tried to bully *him*. The obvious result of such a measure was to be found in his lordship's happy escape from thraldom, which left him at liberty to tell Bella Jones such a tale in the quiet drawing-room at West-Acres as called up blushes, but not of shame, on her comely cheek, and tears, but not of sorrow, into her downcast eyes.

'They will suit each other remarkably well,' was the way in which I translated a page of the vellum-covered volume on my knee; 'better than nine couples out of every ten. She loves him dearly, and she will make him the most willing of wives. He is the last person on earth to exact obedience except in a case of absolute necessity, and then, unless I mistake him very much, he is a man who will *not* be denied. I believe such make the best husbands. Moreover, he is a widower, and Bella will gain hugely by comparison with his late viscountess, a lady with whom I had the disadvantage of being acquainted. She has at least this in her favour, that her rival will not be that imaginary piece of perfection who is supposed to be endowed with all those charms proverbially to be found only in

'bachelors' wives.' Holyhead's, again, is not a nature that can love anything *a little*, and for a short time. He is old enough to know his own mind, and he seems pretty sure of it on this occasion. It will be a cheerful wedding, with more smiles than tears. Then they will go away to the old place in Yorkshire, and the school children will cheer them under arches of laurels, and the tenants will get drunk, and the bonny bride receive a hearty welcome home. Holyhead will live there entirely, and farm a little, and hunt and shoot a good deal, and put on a stone of weight every year; and Bella will expand into a comely matron, with a fine, numerous family, a blessing to the poor, an acquisition to the neighbourhood, and the very prop and mainstay of the annual York Ball.' I thought of the altar-rails, and the grave priest, and the touching blessing—'Well is thee, and happy shalt thou be!' Then I thought—how could I but think?—of one in that very house, its lord and master, sitting apart from all in his own room, alone with his desolate heart. I could feel for him looking blankly into the future—no promise for *him* in the coming years—no hope of that to which almost all men who hope at all look forward at some time or another—a happy home. It is bad enough to think of the journey through the Great Sahara when it is nearly over; but who with the weary ride fresh in his remembrance, the aching eyes, the dizzying glare, the endless caravan, the tiresome bell, the cruel thirst, the maddening sameness day by day,—who, I say, in sight of the palm-trees and minarets at last, but would pity one whom he knew to be mounting his patient camel to commence the self-same pilgrimage? Alas for Gilbert!

I could hardly bear to think of him. Unconsciously as I rose from my chair and paced up and down the long library, my glance rested on the portrait of Frank Orme. In the dim light those eager eyes looked startlingly out of the canvas into my own. I began to understand Lady Gertrude's youthful dislike to the picture. For the first time I acknowledged to its full extent the wild fascination of that handsome face. There was a spell upon me that seemed to affect my nerves and my brain. The eyes haunted me, the more painfully, too, that I avoided them, and turned my back on the figure. Whilst in my ears something seemed continually to whisper, 'To our next merry meeting!' 'To our next merry meeting!'

CHAPTER XLIII.

WON'T YOU?

THE evening in question was an eventful one at West-Acres. As we read that before the Deluge people feasted and amused themselves, and married and were given in marriage, not discontinuing such indulgences even after the rain began to fall, and the avenging waters to mount inch by inch from the sea,—so we of modern times must dine and dress, and make love and conversation, whatever may be impending on ourselves individually, or those who are nearest and dearest to our affections. If you or I were to die to-morrow, kind reader, our survivors must eat and drink. The butler would fill their glasses with sherry, as usual, perhaps a trifle fuller if a feeling man; and should the fish not be boiled enough, do not suppose the cook's shortcomings would escape notice on account of *our* demise. Is there one heart in the world, think you, that will break when you are gone? Perhaps there may be just one. If so, thank God that you have *really* lived, and grudged not to depart when you are called 'Home, to go and take your wages.'

There were several agitated minds above-stairs in

Mr. Orme's house when the servants' supper-bell rang. Not the least so, though he tamed and kept it under with his iron will, was that of Mr. John Gordon, reading the *Western Luminary* upside down, in the little drawing-room, and deriving obvious stores of information from the well-filled columns of that meritorious journal. John was very discontented and unhappy. He had miscalculated his strength; *he*, who never miscalculated anything, and who piqued himself so especially on that same godlike quality of strength. He had thought he was quite man enough to come down to West-Acres for a week and enjoy his shooting, and be as happy as he had always been in Gilbert's society; and if anything decided *should* take place whilst he was there, why, that he could congratulate the cousins with a steady voice and an unruffled brow. Love is blind indeed. John saw clearly, though nobody else did, that Lady Gertrude was on the eve of becoming mistress of West-Acres. And now to-day he had found out that he couldn't bear it. He felt hurt and angry; he had spoken unkindly, bitterly, almost rudely. She must have remarked it; everybody must have heard it; he would not run such another risk of losing his self-control. He would go away to-morrow morning and *never see her again.*

Do you remember the magic mirror on which Cornelius called up for gifted Surrey the image of his love? Do you think she ever looked so fair to him in the reality of daylight at home, as far away in that foreign land, under 'the vaulted roof of gramarye?' Did his heart ever thrill to her fondest whisper when he sat by

her at the banquet, or led her a stately measure through the hall, as it thrilled to mark her image in the depths of that dreamy picture?—where the dear one

> lay reclined,
> And pensive, read from tablet eburnine
> Some strain that seemed her inmost soul to find;
> That favoured strain was Surrey's raptured line,
> That fair and lovely form, the Lady Geraldine.

What was the secret of the wizard's charm but the desolate feeling—he would *never see her again.* Those are the words, that is the spell to call up at an instant the image of the loved one, in its brightest beauty and its dearest perfections. Then we feel the worth of all that we have lost; then we reproach ourselves that we did not value it half enough while it was our own; then we know that henceforth the mirror must be broken and the self-emitted light be quenched for evermore.

John Gordon ran over his whole past life in his mind. He recalled the delicate high-born girl on whom he had dared so long ago to set his heart: a thousand graces of voice and manner, a thousand bright looks and kindly words beamed on his memory once more. He remembered—oh! so well—the first happy day on which the possibility had dawned upon him of winning her at last. What strength and energy had that hope given him for the battle of life. How had he risen in his own esteem for the courage that owned so high an aim, and the determination, which he felt he possessed, that could alone conquer the difficulties in his path. What labour, what efforts, what self-denial had he shrunk from while there was yet a hope? Had he ever miscal-

culated an advantage or thrown a chance away with this one object in view? He had submitted to drudgery, to confinement, to a career of endless and continuous labour, because these were the only steps to advance him on his way. He had consented to be thought avaricious, grovelling, ungenerous, for his relentless pursuit of wealth. And why? Because the bars of the ladder must be made of gold. Why had he winced so painfully from the news of his partner's difficulties, and gone out at once to Sydney, making light of danger, trouble, and hardship; but that he might leave no means untried to refit the dismantled bark that carried all *his* venture. He remembered so vividly her farewell in Portland-place—the turn of her head, the colour of her dress, the very gloves she wore. He had been angry with her then. Ah! he was not angry with her now. Then he recalled her greeting when he returned, and the sense of honour which enforced him to silence while his heart was bursting to speak. Surely she cared for him then. Perhaps he too, like others, had learned to agree with Dante—to acknowledge,

> This is truth the poet sings,
> That a sorrow's crown of sorrow, is remembering happier things.

Well, well; it was no use looking back. Of course she was meant for Gilbert from the first, and he ought to have known it long ago. He hoped she would be happy with her cousin; he would always hope that. For him the dream was over. It had lasted through the best years of his life. He was no lovesick swain,

yet something told him that it would be a darker world henceforth; that was not her fault, but his own weakness. He was not ashamed of it. 'After all,' thought John, 'I have been a better and a kindlier man for her sake.'

Some work of Gertrude's lay on the table at his elbow. She was no persevering sempstress at the best of times, and it was her habit to do a few desultory stitches at a sitting, and leave her embroidery about in an untidy and disorderly manner. By an impulse very unusual in one of his disposition, he took it up and pressed it fervently to his lips. Gertrude, passing softly along the corridor, on her way to the drawing-room, saw the gesture through the open door, and drew her own conclusions, to her own entire satisfaction.

Now this young lady, albeit neither given to 'nerves' nor *migraine*, but rejoicing, on the contrary, in a character and constitution of more than ordinary vigour, was nevertheless to-night in a disturbed and restless frame of mind, from a variety of conflicting causes. The origin of her distress, she persuaded herself, was anxiety on Gilbert's behalf; and her cousin's seclusion in his own room doubtless caused her no inconsiderable uneasiness. She had been to visit him after dinner with a cup of tea, and finding the door locked, had left it there to cool in the passage, and so betook herself to her own room, there to weep a little and bathe her eyes and smooth her hair and shake out her muslin skirts, ere she returned to the drawing-room more radiant than she quitted it.

Now there was no occasion for passing the door of the apartment in which we left Mr. Gordon reading the

Western Luminary, to proceed from Lady Gertrude's chamber to the principal drawing-room, whither she was bound. Such a course, on the contrary, from the plan of the house, involved the transit of several passages and no less than three green-baize doors. We can only conclude, therefore, that Lady Gertrude must have had some unexplained motive for traversing so much unnecessary space. On this subject, as our business lies chiefly with results, we need not trouble ourselves to speculate.

It was one thing, however, to have a sly peep at John Gordon—a sort of farewell look on which to dwell to-morrow when he was gone, and so depart unseen—and another to witness the very ridiculous pantomime which I have ventured to describe. Lady Gertrude was not a person to deliberate when the moment of action had arrived; she was thoroughly versed, moreover, in the character with which she had to deal. Had she not studied it for months, thinking of little else? She knew intuitively that if he went away to-morrow he would never come back again.

'Now or never,' thought her ladyship, and she walked into the room with a bold front indeed, but with quaking limbs and a beating heart.

'Are you studying *cross*-stitch, Mr. Gordon?' said she, with an artificial laugh that would not have deceived a baby.

John dropped the work as if it had burnt his fingers, stood up, sat down again, and looked like a fool.

His embarrassment gave her courage; she could afford to banter him if he was *really* at her mercy.

'I should have thought you required no lessons in

that,' she proceeded, crossing her taper forefingers in close proximity to his face. 'You are going away at a moment's notice; you have scarcely spoken a word since you have been here. Aunt Olivia thought you very much altered. Do you wish to quarrel with *all* your old friends?'

Her antagonist's, we need hardly say, was an honest, manly nature. It was no time now for fencing and trifling, saying one thing and meaning another the while. He was disarmed, and, like a brave man, not ashamed to confess it. The stern face softened as she had seen it soften once or twice before, and the voice in which he spoke was very kind and tender in its grave sorrow—

'I will never quarrel with you, Gertrude. I have been learning a hard lesson; I am not quite perfect in it yet. God bless you! I shall not see you again to wish you good bye. I go early to-morrow.'

'Why?' she asked, glancing uneasily at him. She could not trust her voice to add another syllable.

'I will not grudge you your triumph,' he answered, still in those grave, kind tones. 'It is soon said. Once, Lady Gertrude, I was fool enough to hope I might some day win you. Now it is only right I should pay the penalty of my presumption. Listen. For a good many years I tried to build up a fortune, that I might ask you to share it. Even then I think I should have been prepared for a refusal; but at least I could have come boldly forward and made my offer. All *that* is impossible now. You are generous, Lady Gertrude: this avowal will not deprive me of your friendship? It is for my own sake that I ask not to meet you very

often, for even a man like me has his defenceless points. I must go back to work now after my holiday. You know I am poor.'

'But I am rich,' exclaimed Gertrude, hastily; and then crimsoning to her temples, rested her arms on the chimney-piece and hid her face in her hands.

I believe though, she peeped at him through her fingers, for she must have been aware of the struggle that tore that brave heart and convulsed the well-known face usually so staid and composed, or she never could have found courage to make the following remarkable little speech, spoken very low, and in accents of breathless rapidity—

'Don't be so proud! Will you not ask me to share with you all I have in the world?'

The strong arm was round her at last. She buried her face on the broad true breast. And then having succeeded in getting what most she wanted on earth, of course she set to work and cried as if her heart would break.

So the lady proposed to the gentleman, after all! How shocking, how incorrect, how unfeminine! Quite a reversal of the established order of things. And yet if my married friends will take the trouble to recal the most thrilling moments of their lives, they will perhaps agree with me that, *virtually* at least, such trespasses on the privilege of leap-year are neither wholly inexcusable nor quite so rare as is usually supposed.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE HUSBAND.

IF you will take the trouble to consult the terrestrial globe in your library, and are not too much puzzled by the brass meridian, called by courtesy 'of Greenwich,' which girds the same, you will, if I mistake not, find certain colonial districts of Australia as nearly as possible the direct antipodes to our own country. If you are also a believer in those theories regarding the solar system which are considered the most plausible in the present century, you will hardly dispute the position that nine o'clock in the evening at West-Acres was nine in the morning at Sydney.

I have endeavoured, partly from my own observation, partly from matters that have since come to my knowledge, to describe what was occurring in one of 'the quiet homes of England' at this particular hour. I wish I could bring before you a scene that was being enacted almost at the same moment on the opposite side of the world.

I should be sorry to ask my reader to wade with me through the coarse details that make up the life of such a man as William Latimer. One who has, to use the common expression, 'seen better days,' and

who with his lost position has also lost the self-respect which depended alone on extraneous circumstances, is apt, I imagine, to sink into a lower depth of degradation than the more ignorant and, so to speak, *natural* blackguard. The man has glimpses of what he was, and what he might have been, which madden while they drive him to despair. He cannot rise to anything better, he knows full well, because he has shut the door upon himself; he cannot fall, he thinks, to anything worse than a disgraced and branded object. So he lives for the passing moment. He is vicious, because he has lost the only two *moral* checks to vice—hope and self-respect. He is idle, because who would be fool enough to work save with a view of improving his position. He is pitiless, because none, he thinks, would help or pity *him;* and he feels at last a morbid triumph in making himself *really* as bad as he is thought.

Since Gilbert took leave of Ada's husband at Sydney, after that meeting in the wild Australian bush, which was to the one but a pleasant episode in a life of continual change, to the other a sudden destruction of his whole future, Latimer had been following out the same career of speculation and debauchery which had first driven him from England, and then ruined him in the colony; yet which, to such a mind as his, was not without its charms. Yes, there *is* a pleasure in excitement—there *is* a pleasure in dissipation—there *is* a pleasure in vice—that is the worst of it. But what a price we pay for them, even in ready money here. What a reversion we sell for them hereafter.

Latimer had thought of reforming over and over

again, but he knew full well that, however much he might talk about it in his softer moments, there were many reasons to prevent his return to England. Even in the colony he was now too well known to occupy a respectable position. His only chance was to make one large successful speculation, and then with the profits, or rather the plunder, to seek a fresh home in the United States, or perhaps some of the lawless republics of Central America. Should he send for Ada to join him? This was a measure he had often debated in his own mind. He never seemed for a moment to question her willingness to come. Altogether he was persuaded he could do better without her. He wished he was rid of her—he wished she was free and independent of him. Every time he looked at her bracelet, he seemed more and more to have forgotten the donor. Yet he kept the trinket too. He liked to think sometimes that he could not always have been so *very* bad, or she would not have given him this remembrance. But he had formed and broken so many ties since then, he had simply almost forgotten her. Latimer was one of those men on whom a barmaid *in præsenti* makes more impression than an absent Madonna. What would you have? There are many such. I have often thought these are the dispositions women like best. He had written a second letter to his wife, postponing his promised return to England, but telling her where he was to be found. He now considered whether he should not send her a third, expressing his intentions of never troubling her again, and bidding her a final 'Farewell.' He was waiting before he despatched so conclusive a missive

to accompany it with a round sum of money, thus salving, as it were, his own conscience, and persuading himself he was doing rather a generous action after all. He must indeed have quite forgotten Ada when he meditated such a proceeding as this.

It is no easy task, however, to get hold of that same round sum of money, which is not only as slippery as ice, but melts like that substance in the grasp. When he was sober, Latimer was doubtless a shrewd, observant man, not without considerable aptitude for business, and that readiness to embark on fresh schemes, profitable in proportion to their risk, which often in a new country leads to considerable success. But we must take leave to mistrust all these rapid methods of growing rich. Cent. per cent. is a tempting return, doubtless; but undertakings which promise so largely are apt to swallow up the capital before the interest is paid, and the speculator has nothing left of his venture but the satisfaction of knowing that while five hundred pounds more would have made his fortune, the present amount of his assets is easily represented by a round o.

So Latimer went into one thing after another, with untiring energy indeed, but varied success. One day he had put by an overplus, and saw his way clearly to independence; the next he had kicked it all down again in trying to double it too hastily. He was ever looking forward to a to-morrow that should enable him to send home a certain sum, and what he called 'wind up his affairs;' but that 'to-morrow' never came. Such courses could not but tell upon his health and habits. In the true spirit of a gambler, he learned to live only for the enjoyment of the present hour. He had always

been addicted to pleasure; he now became a confirmed sensualist. The human appetite, like the human frame, soon adapts itself to circumstances. If we cannot get turtle and venison, we munch with sufficient *gusto* our simple meal of bread and cheese. Nay, if the latter relish be not forthcoming, we gnaw vigorously at the dry crust. With Katherine the shrew, rather than remain empty, we are fain to cry, 'Why, then, the beef, and let the mustard rest;' nor have we even the heart to fall foul of mocking Grumio when he offers us 'the mustard without the beef.' Latimer used to be very particular about the flavour of his dry champagne, and the exact degree to which it was iced. He could drink gin and bad brandy now out of a battered pewter measure, nor hesitated to qualify his morning draught of milk with that abominable mixture which is sold under the name of new rum.

Let us see what he is doing at the door of that low store outside the town of Sydney, with the bright morning sun shining on his face, and children all about him, trooping off, clean and healthy, to school.

He is altered, shockingly altered. The fresh complexion is mottled and sodden as it were with drink. The eyes are dim, watery, and bloodshot. His figure has lost its squareness, but the body has become bloated, whilst the limbs have shrunk. His cherished whiskers, no longer oiled and curled with such tender care, run to waste beneath his chin in unkempt circles streaked with grey. His dress is frayed and shabby in the extreme, but looks the less so from being made of such coarse material as suits a working man. He wears a red nightcap over one ear with an assumption of

bravado still, and preserves through all his reverses a certain manliness, or call it rather audacity, of gesture and demeanour the result of his adventurous life. There is a bad look though in those leering eyes of his, and as he lights a short pipe, and lifts that wicked face to the sun, the children pass the other side of the way to avoid touching him.

He smokes for a while in silence, and seems weighing some dubious matter in his mind. Once when a burst of childish laughter strikes upon his ear he gives vent to a low curse, feels in his empty pockets, and turns on his heel with a louder and deeper oath. 'Cleaned out!' he mutters, 'you incurable idiot. Well, it must go with the rest!'

A tawdry woman, with sunken eyes and dishevelled hair, cowering under a close-wrapped shawl of flaunting faded colours, walks up to him and lays her hand upon his shoulder. The hand, though dirty, is well-shaped, and the wasted features tell of former beauty, almost of refinement.

'Speak to me, Bill,' she says; 'you've never been home all night, dear; what luck?'

Her voice is kind and tender. She seems to trust and cling to him. Reprobate as the man is, he has found some one to make him a home, even here.

He shakes her off, but not unkindly. 'Cleaned out!' he repeats. 'The old story over and over again. Everything I put my hand to seems to rot and turn to rubbish. Whether it's land, or houses, or sheep, or stores, or dice, or cards, all's one to *me*. There's a turn in the luck for other fellows; *I* never get a chance. It *can't* go on! I tell ye, it *can't* go on. Best leave me,

Jane, and try to shift for yourself. It's only a fool that sticks by a sinking ship!'

'Not likely,' she answered, smiling rather sadly; 'is it all gone, Bill? What did you play at?'

A look of interest lights up her countenance while she asks the question. She is a gambler, too, this faded, fallen woman, for his sake, and likes to hear of his successes and reverses because they are *his*.

He swears horribly in reply. '*Monte!*' he screams out, with a dreadful imprecation; and on that most gambling of games he continues to enlarge through a stream of blasphemous abuse that at length cannot but exhaust his passion and his lungs together.

It is maddening, doubtless, to recal the last night's orgie and its consequences. He had been paid the previous day a large sum of money for a wool-bargain, in which he had certainly not shown the simplicity of the poor shorn animal. He could not of course resist the temptation of turning into a spirit-store for the purpose of 'wetting' his luck. There he sat and drank, this man who had once been a member of second-rate clubs and dined at military messes, with the refuse of the worst population of Sydney, taking a strange morbid pleasure, as it seemed, in the very ribaldry and indecency of his associates; even poor abandoned Jane did not dare look for him there, or fetch him thence till daylight. He caroused, and sang, and shouted with the rest—he treated them to liquor—he boasted of his money. With his eyes open, with his intellects no more affected by his potations than those of a man usually are who seldom goes to bed sober, he sat down deliberately to play cards with a party of ruffians any

one of whom had merited and probably earned transportation for life. He knew they would cheat him if they could. On occasion, he was not scrupulous in that way himself. He knew that fear of detection alone would make them hesitate for an instant to cut his throat, if by so doing they could get his money; and yet, knowing all this, such was the habitual craving for excitement, the restless thirst for gain engendered by his mode of life, that he seemed impelled by some irresistible power to risk his whole means, where he felt that chance, and fraud, and violence would all be combined against him.

At first he resolved of course that he would only play for a quarter of the sum he had about him—then the half—then he won, and he thought it would be a fine thing to double it, and so write the long-proposed letter, with a handsome enclosure, to Ada. Fortune was going to smile upon him at last, he felt sure of it. The most experienced gambler is just as infatuated as the raw beginner. He was persuaded he should win his great stake to-night, and never try again. Then he lost—once—twice, sweeping ventures in succession. He must go on now and get it back again at any risk; he should never forgive himself else. The cards seemed to be in league against him. He called for more drink, and now the worst passions of his nature blazed out. He accused his antagonist, a brawny, bearded ruffian on his way to the gold-diggings *viâ* the hulks, of cheating, and the accusation, accompanied by the whole pack of cards, was flung back in his face; blows were exchanged, knives were drawn; the landlord, and a gigantic negro who performed the office of waiter, parted them before

blood was spilt. Such outrages were neither rare nor much regarded, and the party, including Latimer, were soon set down to their game again as if nothing had happened. When the sun rose he had but a hundred dollars left in the world. It is a strange feeling, that embarkation of the *last* venture, not without a hideous fascination of its own. The gambler's horizon becomes narrowed to the closest limits. His world is a circle of some two or three feet in diameter. Time is represented by the next deal of the cards. Every sense is sharpened on the keen whetstone of anxiety, yet strange to say, the very agony of suspense is dashed with something not entirely pain. There is a dull sensation of relief, too, when all is lost, consequent on the relaxation of the nerves, strung to so unendurable a pitch. When the cord is broken the bow cannot but spring back. Ere the sun had been up two hours Latimer walked out of that reeking den into the pure air of heaven, for the hundredth time, a ruined man. The best of wives could hardly have refrained from expressing disapprobation, but she was *not* his wife, and she never reproached him so much as by a sign.

'We can begin again, Bill,' she said, taking him by the arm to lead him home. Such a home! 'It's been as bad as this more than once before, and I'm stronger now, I can work.'

His only answer was another imprecation; but he suffered her to take him on a few steps ere he stopped, and looking fixedly at her shook himself loose from her hold once more.

'You're a good girl,' he said, 'you've a brave heart of your own. Look ye here, Jane, it's all up with me

this bout, I'll have to go to the diggings again, or may be take to the bush, or worse. You and I'll part, not in unkindness, lass, not in unkindness; but what's the use of dragging you down any lower along with me? Don't take on so, girl! It must have come some day. What's the odds?'

She sobbed violently. She clasped her hands over his arm. He was in fustian, she in rags, both were depraved, immoral, desperate, yet the same feeling was tearing that poor sinful bosom, that stirred Cornelia's heart for the father of the Gracchi.

'Let me go with you!' she entreated; 'I'll follow you (follow *of* you, she expressed it) to the end of the world.'

Something almost like tears came into William Latimer's eyes as he bent down and kissed her poor wan face.

'It can't be, my lass,' he replied; 'but I won't forget you, for all that. D—n it! Jane, you shan't starve. See here—I'll do for you what I've never done for man nor woman yet. Look at this' (he pulled the bracelet from his bosom as he spoke), 'I've kept this safe for many a long day. I've held on to it when I hadn't a "mag" in my pocket, nor a crust in my wallet, nor a screw of "baccy" in my pipe. I thought never to have parted with it, never; but I'll give it you, Jane, because you've been a good girl to me, and you'll keep it, lass, won't you, now, and think of me sometimes when I'm gone?'

Her eyes glistened as she stretched out her hand for those golden links glittering in the sun. For a moment she forgot they were to part, in the pleasure of her

new acquisition, and the kind words with which he had accompanied his gift. She would not have been a woman, though, had she not looked quickly up in his face and asked him,

'Who gave it you?'

'My wife!' he replied, with something almost of shame. 'Never mind about that. You take it, my dear. It's all you'll ever get from me; and so Fare ye well!'

Perhaps it was the first unselfish action he had ever done in his life; and Latimer walked away with his hands in his empty pockets, and a feeling akin to exultation in his heart. He had not a farthing in the world, nor credit to obtain a meal. What of that? He had been on the brink of utter destitution so often, that he shrank but little from the precipice he had accustomed himself to contemplate. To do him justice, he was more concerned for the future of the poor woman who clung to him so trustingly, than for his own. He liked to think he had done the best he could for her, though he should not see her again.

He had no property, and but few clothes, which indeed were not worth returning for; so his intention was to walk off into the open country without delay, and take his chance of some menial employment to procure him food. Last night's excesses were still ringing in his brain, and he did not yet appreciate the forlorn condition to which he had sunk. He strode on, sucking the short black pipe, and wondering vaguely what would become of him.

The sun was hot, and vice had sapped his once powerful frame. Ere he had gone a mile or two, he sat down

to rest by the way-side, and so dropped off to sleep. He was woke by some soft substance thrust under his head—the poor woman had followed him, and stripped off her ragged shawl to make him a pillow. He swore at her in return, and bade her go back to the town, and not interfere with him any more.

'It will be the worse for you if you do,' he growled. 'What made me give you that bit of filagree, but for a keepsake? Be off with you at once.'

'You gave it me for my own,' she answered, 'to do what I liked with. Look here.'

She showed him a handful of gold and silver. Ada's last gift had brought enough money to keep them for weeks to come. His face relented as he looked at the coin.

'We'll have a parting glass together, at least,' he said, with a brutal laugh, preparing to retrace his steps towards the town.

She folded his hand in both of hers, and pressed it to her bosom.

'Take it all—all,' she urged, in eager imploring tones. 'I got it only for you. But don't leave me; don't drive me away from you! Bill, Bill, I have but you in the world

CHAPTER XLV.

THE WIFE.

'I SEE her go by yesterday to the post-office, it's but the second time since she's come. She's never asked for a letter yet, I *know*. It's my belief there's something more than queer about her, for all her black dress and thick veil.'

The speaker was a stout buxom personage with a loud shrill voice, and a pair of bare arms smeared with flour. No bad specimen of the English matron of the middle class. Bustling, warm-hearted, suspicious, thrifty, prolific, and uncharitable. She brought up her young family in the rugged paths of virtue, and conducted 'the business'—a combination of baking, grocery, tea, pepper, snuff, and tobacco—with vigilance and energy. She was much respected, not to say feared, in her native town; by none more so than by her 'master,' as she called him, a ghost-like personage, who might be seen at times pervading the back shop, appearing and disappearing through a trap door like the elder Hamlet, and sustaining his spiritual character by never speaking unless spoken to. He was a quiet man, was Mr. Barber, with a turn for meditation, and his wife was a thought too much for him.

'She've a been to church regular since she come,' an-

swered a little musty old woman, like a moth, who was purchasing with her ounce or two of tea the right to her hebdomadal gossip in Mrs. Barber's shop; a favourite lounge, indeed, as commanding the linen-draper's and the post-office; 'but she always waits till every one of 'em's gone afore she leaves her pew; and though she give me a shilling only last Sunday, she never lifted her veil, and she durstn't look me in the face. Such airs! She's no widder-woman, not she, mem. I should know, Mrs. Barber, for troubles I've seen, and troubles I've come through. Ow's Jemima? poor lamb, she do take on so with her teething.'

Such digressions are not unusual in the conversation of ladies who adorn this rank of life, and Jemima's infirmities disposed of, the original topic was reverted to with renewed vigour.

'It's weeks she's been here, Mrs. Mould,' resumed the proprietress, placing one arm akimbo, and the other with thumb reversed upon the counter, 'and nobody knows no more about her and her belongings nor when first she come. I never see her go out a-hairing, or what not, till dusk, and nobody will tell me that's what a respectable woman's been used to. I don't like your fly-by-nights, Mrs. Mould, and I never did. She may be this, and she may be that, but I say I can't make her out, I can't, nor Barber can't make her out, nor nobody can't make her out.'

'She come respectable, too, at first,' observed Mrs. Mould, meditatively. 'First-class railway ticket, two trunks, and a bonnet-box. It's truth, mem, for my lad, you know, he got a job up at the station. She pays regular, too, for what she has—little enough it is,

they do tell me; but she's free with her money, for that matter. It's hard to tell, though; the worsest is the least likely to want, more's the pity. Deary me! it's a queer world!'

Mrs. Mould was quite right, it *is* a queer world. Why did they think ill of the stranger, these two honest, hard-working gossips? Simply because they knew nothing of her; and it seems to come so much more natural to suspect than to confide. Even in that remote country town, with its branch railway and its one hotel—by courtesy so-called—its half-a-dozen shops, its annual fair, and perennial stagnation, the drowsy inhabitants were as prone to think evil of their neighbours as if they formed the most bustling community of the most mercantile city in the world, where it is everybody's business to get the better of somebody else on the shortest notice. 'No trust,' seems to be the motto on the turnpike road of life. The toll-keeper is but a fair specimen of his kind. 'Will you trust me?' says the bagman, as he pulls up and ungloves, loth even in the act of payment to resist his commercial tendency to a joke. 'Why should I?' answers the toll-keeper, 'I don't know you.' 'Will you trust me to-day?' reiterates the waggish traveller on his return. 'Not I,' repeats the toll-keeper, 'I know you too well.' We are all toll-keepers or bagmen, I think. Confiding reader, would you trust any man you don't know? Experienced wayfarer, how many would you trust of those you do?

The lady who afforded a never-failing subject of conversation to the fair inhabitants of this quiet country town, had arrived there several weeks previous to the above dialogue, during which time she had persever-

ingly led a life of the strictest seclusion, resisting all advances to acquaintance with resolution indeed, but with a sad pleading humility that was very touching. Once when a neighbour's child was taken suddenly ill, she had afforded prompt assistance, both pecuniary and personal; but on the patient's recovery she had obviously repudiated the friendship of its parents, and avoided every opportunity of accepting their thanks. When the curate of the parish called on her, an old grey-headed priest, who had been labouring in the vineyard through the burden and heat of the day, satisfied with his present penny in consideration of his future pension, she had consistently denied him admittance. Even that charitable man feared she was a lost sheep, and could only *hope* she might be a Magdalen. Nay, more wonderful than all, though the few observers who had been fortunate enough to behold it, pronounced her face one of extraordinary beauty and sweetness, she was notorious for concealing that face with the most studious vigilance, and even preferred to take her stroll for fresh air in the early morning before any one was up, or after dusk, when she tried to pass from her quiet lodgings unobserved, it is hardly necessary to add, in vain.

This last precaution was a heavy grievance. Mrs. Barber was not the only lady who 'couldn't abide your fly-by-nights.' They are close reasoners, these women, on a system of logic peculiarly their own. 'Why,' said they, 'should she live so retired, if she don't want to hide herself? Why should she want to hide herself unless she's done something to be ashamed of? What crime can a person like *that* have committed save

one? Depend upon it, ma'am, she's *no better than she should be.*'

To the masculine mind one or two links in the above chain of argument may seem wanting. To the female intellect, with its imaginative powers and steadfast adherence to a foregone conclusion, the evidence is final and satisfactory.

So they voted Ada Latimer (I can hardly bear to write it) somebody's disgraced wife or cast-off mistress; and after a while, if she *should* accidentally cross the street, Mrs. Barber would call in her children from playing on the door-step; and Mrs. Mould, a custodian of morals in virtue of her ecclesiastical office, would wrap herself in all the dignity of unassailed and unassailable virtue, and like the Pharisee in the parable, 'pass by on the other side.'

And what was Ada doing in this quiet little country town? I must go back a space to explain her motives.

She had lingered in London—who can blame her?—till the crisis of Gilbert's illness was past, and she had ascertained—as women *do* find out things—that he was no longer in danger. Then she fell upon her knees and thanked the God who never had deserted her, and rose up, determined to be gone. Do not judge her too harshly that she was not strong enough to be within a few streets of him, and never wish to see him. Many and many a time had she cast up, so to speak, and balanced the account in her own mind. On one side, the delirium of a few years; on the other, two souls lost for an eternity. And yet—she shuddered to think that she could weigh the alternative—there was no safety for her but in flight. She called up the worn ghastly

face, with its wasted features and hollow eyes, as she saw it last, betwixt life and death, on its pillow, and dwelt upon it till she felt as if her brain was going If he should come and plead with her, looking as he did then. What could she do? She knew its power too well. Why, even now she *thirsted* but to look upon it once more, and then to die. She must never see him again, never, for both their sakes. That always seemed to make it easier. When they parted before, she had wisely left London, for she knew that no efforts would be wanting on his part to find her out, and had gone to the north of England, where, under a feigned name, she had recommenced her laborious career as a teacher of music. But even this occupation she feared was too public. One or two circumstances, slight in themselves, and perhaps only apparent to her excited imagination, made her fancy she was not safe from discovery even there; and after her return to London, and departure from it a second time, she had again changed her place of residence, and resolved to live for a fixed period in a state of the strictest seclusion. The path of duty was plain enough: she must go and join her husband in Australia. Well did she know what a life was before her. Hard living, hard work, hard words, would be her portion; but it seemed she would rather it should be so; that luxury and comfort would be unbearable, and time for thought to be dreaded above all. That 'nothing-can-hurt-me-now' feeling is desolation indeed. She had been painfully uncertain about Latimer's movements as well. Till his second letter arrived, definitively postponing his return to England, she could come to no decision; and even that letter was so worded as to con-

vince her that she would be most unwelcome when she did reach him. After its reception, however, she seemed to make up her mind. She had enough money left, the proceeds of her professional exertions, to pay her passage out to Sydney. In the meantime, she husbanded her resources with economy; and although, as Mrs. Mould had ascertained, she paid honestly for everything she bought, the purchases were but few, and limited to the mere necessaries of life.

Her movements were watched with a vigilance that can only be conceived by those who have ever resided in a small country town; and Mrs. Barber was perfectly correct when she affirmed that the mysterious stranger had visited the post-office but twice during her stay. The first time she had posted a letter to her husband in Australia, the second was on the very day that witnessed my arrival at West-Acres. On that occasion she hesitated long ere she dropped the missive into the fatal box. Mrs. Barber, prying from amongst her miscellaneous stores, watched it despatched with intense gratification. Had she known its contents she might have judged that lonely woman less harshly for pity's sake.

The evening was falling while the two chief gossips of the town gave their final award upon Mrs. Latimer's character. She had just passed up the street in her usual black dress and the thick veil that gave such offence. She thought she would soon leave England for ever, and she would look upon its homely beauties now whilst she could. Moreover, after a great mental effort, as after a physical struggle, the very frame seems to gasp for fresh air. I think the spirit can dominate the body with less difficulty in the free open country;

and I can well understand the feeling which prompts many a man to wish that when his time comes he may die out of doors.

Ada Latimer walked on towards the sunset by the side of a sluggish river. The damp haze of evening rose moist and chill about her, the autumn leaves dropped noiselessly in her path, not stirred by the breeze, because the air was calm and still, but perishing, like everything on earth, by the inevitable process of decay. The time and the season were in keeping with her own thoughts. A merry, hopeful spring day would have broken her heart.

As the shadows darkened round her she walked on and on. One favourite haunt she had already found where certain stately chestnuts and a few acres of level sward reminded her of Kensington Gardens. Thither mechanically she directed her steps. At another time, like any other delicate woman, she might have felt alarmed thus to stroll by herself in the deepening twilight through lonely meadows and unfrequented paths; but Ada had no fears now. 'Tis a fluctuating quality, that same disregard of danger, depending much upon the value of what we risk. The first in the breach, for aught we know, may be a man whose present state is such that it would be rather an advantage to be knocked on the head than otherwise. Private Jones may be certain, if he escape the perils of the assault to-day, that he will be flogged to-morrow for the violence and rapine of yesterday. Sergeant Brown, on the contrary, is safe to be promoted, if he be not killed, wife and children provided for, long years of meritorious services rewarded at last. I think Brown deserves most credit

for courage when he scrambles over the parapet alongside of Jones. 'Nothing to lose and all to win,' should make a man a hero if anything will, and

> Let him take castles who has ne'er a groat,

is the sentiment of a shrewd observer of human nature, though put into the mouth of a common soldier.

When she reached the spot at which it was her habit to turn, she sat down upon the steps of a certain stile, and for the first time ventured to review the reflections of the past twenty-four hours. She was human, after all; and the final struggle had been very severe and exhausting. So long as she remained in England, so long as the same sky covered them, the same topics interested them; nay, so long as it was possible they might see the same people—such is the sophistry of love—she felt that every link was not completely torn asunder. Therefore she believed she must fly—therefore she thought the sacrifice could not be perfected unless they were parted even in thought—therefore she must give him up unreservedly, and once for all.

Those may blame you, gentle, sorrowing Ada, who have never been so tried, even for your sufferings. 'It was her duty never to think of him for an instant, to dismiss him at once from her mind,' says Cornelia; and doubtless the Roman matron is right. It is well for those whose affections can thus be managed 'like a steed that knows its rider.' It is better perhaps for those whose affections require the spur rather than the curb; but I can feel for you if Cornelia cannot. I knew him so well in his happy days—his kindly,

cheerful disposition, his winning manner, his varied accomplishments, his refinement of feeling, his deference to all women, his devotion to *one*, his frankness, his generosity, above all, his brave and loving heart. It must have been a hard task for any woman to give up Gilbert Orme.

It is done, however. The last few weeks had made Ada comparatively an old woman. Incessant thought, racking memories, maddening temptation, had furrowed even her fair gentle brow, and brought a thread or two of white amongst the glossy hair. It seemed that she must be racked to the utmost, for not the least of her tortures was the doubt of her right to wish him a last farewell, not in person, that she would never have dared to contemplate, but a few kind words by letter. Stern Conscience said No; but Memory called up a vision of the dear face, and the kind eyes she had loved so fondly, and the aching heart pleaded hard for that slight relief.

'Poor fellow! I am glad I wrote to him,' said she, sitting on the step of the stile alone in the dark night. And then she drew her shawl round her, and fell a-thinking.

When hope is done with, and we feel that a certain era of our life is concluded; that we have closed, as it were, one of the volumes and put it back upon the shelf, never to be taken down again, there comes over the mind a kind of retrospective *clairvoyance*, to which the every-day efforts of memory are but blurred and indistinct daubs. Can it be something like this which they say pervades the brain of a drowning man (the only death, by the way, in which mortals seem to be

permitted to put one foot over the fatal threshold and then draw it back again), and which recals to him, as it were in a magic mirror, every scene of his past existence, from his earliest childhood to his present suffocation? We have most of us felt something akin to this painful faculty when kneeling by the couch of a dead friend, or mourning over the buried hopes that were more to us than all the friends in the world. We are most of us conscious that there are certain turns in the road of life at which we pause and look back upon the past stage, feeling that the next step we take will shut it out from our vision for ever, whether it hath been across a barren moor, or along a rich valley teeming with corn and wine, or through the enchanted garden where the sunlight lingers still though we have passed into the shade, and of which a fragrance yet clings around us from the roses, though our limbs be torn and festering with the thorns. We cannot *forget*, we say, in our self-commiseration—God help us! Do we try?

Ada soon lost herself in the long labyrinth of the past. She went back to her first meeting with the gay, light-hearted Mr. Orme; to the dinner at the old Alderman's, and the exultation with which she had found herself in society, and such agreeable society, once more; to the self-confidence and self-content that pleasant evening had given her, and the undefined hope, so soothing in its dim uncertainty, that she might perhaps see him again. Then she remembered how her heart used to beat when he overtook her in the Park, and how well she knew that step amongst a hundred others, long before it came up with her; how she had

wept, and grieved, and fretted ere she forced herself to forego those cherished interviews, and how hurt and angry she felt at his fancied defalcation, although she had told herself all along that he had never belonged to *her*, and never could. Was it all pain that made her eyes run over while she recalled their conversation at the Villa, and those weeks of intense happiness that succeeded the avowal of his love? Ah! he was her own, then, her *very* own. Nothing came between them but a sense of her unworthiness, and that seemed but to enhance her trust in him, the generous, the chivalrous, and the kind. How proudly she used to watch him when he left her, and how her heart would swell with very triumph to feel that she had won that noble, gentle, unselfish being—so loyal, so hopeful, and so true. She would weep from sheer excess of joy to think of her own happiness. It was no easy task to bid him leave her. When he had fairly sailed, she fancied she was very lonely and unhappy. Oh! could she but go back to those days and be now as she was then.

It would not do; it was unendurable to recal the trials and the miseries of the succeeding time—the torturing anxieties of his illness, and the crushing agony of that last sight of him on his sick-bed when she bade him farewell. She should go mad, she thought, if she dwelt on these afflictions, yet had they been present with her, sleeping and waking, ever since. Was there nothing left? Nothing to live for, nothing to hope, nothing to pray for here or hereafter? But one glimpse of light in the black darkness! she pleaded—one drop of balm to soothe

the cruel stripes—one ray of hope to help her with the heavy load along the weary way!

The chill misty evening had long ere this merged into night. As Ada lifted her white face in imploring eagerness to heaven, a star or two broke forth in the dreary sky, and a watery moon rising through the haze, shed its pale light over the dark meadows and the shadowy hedges, and the nodding elms by which she was surrounded. The night-wind, too, was rising fitfully in gusts, moaning and sighing at intervals, and hushing off again into stillness. Without, all was mournful, cheerless, and desolate; within, an icy grasp seemed to be closing round her heart.

Yet Ada prayed to the God who made her, that He would have mercy upon her now in her great sorrow. Leaning her forehead against the smooth worn bar of the stile, she poured forth her wild despairing petition, only that they might not be parted *for ever*—that she might see him again, not here, not here, but in another life—in the heaven she strove so hard to win;—at least, that where he was there might she be also, and so see him again, only see him again!

As she rose, his well-known figure came into the moonlight, and crossing the path in front of her stopped an instant and looked her steadfastly in the face. His countenance was very pale, and there was the same eager, mournful look in the deep eyes that she remembered so well when he was pleading with her for his life's happiness.

'Gilbert! Gilbert!—did you get my letter?' she exclaimed, stretching out her arms, as she staggered

rather than ran towards him in the tumult of her feelings. Ere she could reach him he was gone.

Just then the breeze, rising once more, bore with it the chimes of the town-clock striking the half-hour after nine. Those familiar sounds recalled her to herself, and she was aware that she was shivering with cold and her feet were dripping wet. Looking down she perceived the marks of her own footsteps in the dewy film that stood on the thick saturated herbage through which she had passed when she left the path to follow him; yet was there no track but this on either side the footway.

She did not faint, she did not cry out nor moan; but a vague horror seemed to creep over her and enfold her, as a corpse is folded in its shroud. Though she walked home with swift unfaltering steps, she moved bewildered and half-conscious, like one in a dream.

Was it better to have seen him thus than not at all?

CHAPTER XLVI.

ATROPOS.

I AM no believer in presentiments. I never went to bed more thoroughly wearied and disposed for sleep than on the evening which bestowed four people so happily, which witnessed the total breaking up of John Gordon's habitual reserve, the subjection of Lady Gertrude's pride, and the hearty self-satisfaction of the good-natured peer who was to make Bella Jones a viscountess. They slept light, the four, I doubt not, or lay awake looking far into the rosy future, peopled with its shining visions of love, and faith, and confidence, and all that makes life worth having. What need had they of dreams—those glowing hearts, steeped in their 'sober certainty of waking bliss?' Not for such doth judicious Proserpine think it worth while to unclose the Ivory Gate, and despatch her shadowy doves to flit around the sleeper's couch. No; it is the fevered cheek of the hopeless that they fan with their downy wings. It is to the broken and the lost that they bring the thrilling memories and the magic wealth, and the maddening impossibilities of a dream. It is to those who lay their heads down, praying they may never rise again, that sleep restores what fate has snatched away. Then

the stern consort of the king of hell smiles in her sad beauty, for she knows that when they wake to reality in the grey morning once more, the last drop of bitterness shall have been poured in, which the cup of life will hold.

I had neither hopes nor fears to keep my eyes open. The one Memory that has never left me in all these years, shining through the far distance still, like a star of heaven, eternal and unchanged, had smiled upon me ere I sank to rest. I was not anxious, nor was I alarmed, but simply a little saddened by the recollections of the day, and *very* tired. So I think my slumbers were the soundest of all the sleepers in that large house—of all save one.

I was woke by a gentle tap at my bed-room door, and the voice of Gilbert's valet, an attached fellow, who had been with him through his illness, calling me by name.

'May I come in, sir?' he said, in an agitated whisper, as though loth to disturb the rest of the household; 'I want to speak to you, if you please.'

I huddled on a few clothes, and opened the shutters to let in the cold light of the misty morning, just beginning to dawn.

The man was dressed as he had waited at dinner; evidently he had been sitting up all night. His face was very pale, and he trembled. I knew something dreadful had happened before he spoke.

'Mr. Orme!—sir,' he said, trying to steady his voice; 'he's never been to bed all night, sir! I beg your pardon for disturbing you, but I've been to his door several times. I—I can't get him to hear!'

What made me feel so horror-struck, and yet so little surprised?

'He must have gone to sleep at his writing-table,' I answered, in corresponding tones of caution. Whence had I the intuition that, even while the words passed my lips, convicted me of a lie?

The man grasped eagerly at the suggestion. He was a ready fellow, I knew, and with better nerves than the generality of his order.

'He ought to be woke, sir,' said he, recovering his breath and colour. 'He'll catch his death of cold there with the fire out. I can't get into the room because the door's locked. I didn't like to disturb the other gentlemen or any of the family, but I thought you wouldn't take it amiss, sir, if I came to ask you what I'd better do?'

By this time I was dressed; the man handing me my things unconsciously and from mere habit, as I wanted them. When we got into the passage he turned pale once more—

'I can take the lock off the door, sir,' he whispered; 'if you think it necessary.'

We reached his room. It was on the ground-floor, and far apart from any of the bed-chambers, so there was no fear of disturbing the other sleepers. As a matter of form I knocked twice or thrice pretty loudly, and then sent the man to fetch his tools for forcing the door. How long he seemed to be gone!—and yet what a vague impression have I of that interval!

He returned at last. That was a moment of breathless suspense, which I shall never forget, when the lock came off, and fell with a clink upon the floor.

We both paused while one might have counted ten. Neither had courage to open the door and confront the horror that each had so dreaded yet would not confess even to himself.

I pushed it back at last, and walked in. The fire was out, but candles were still burning, and the window-curtains drawn. The first thing I observed was Gilbert's watch upon the carpet.

My boy sat with his back to us, still in his shooting-dress; his head had sunk upon the writing-table, and lay pillowed on one arm, the other hand hung listlessly over the edge, but the fingers were clenched into the palm.

I touched it with mine, scarce knowing what I did. It was quite cold.

'He's asleep,' said the shaking valet, in a hoarse whisper. 'He's never dressed since he came in, and he's fallen off to sleep in his chair!'

'He is indeed asleep, Jones,' was all I could answer, 'and so sound, that he will never wake again.'

Soon there were noises of hurrying feet in the passage, and pale faces one behind another blocking up the door-way, and suppressed whispers at intervals, and then the awful silence that seizes those who look upon the dead. I was relieved to see Holyhead and Gordon amongst the shuddering servants, and to learn that *his* relatives had not yet been disturbed.

'Lady Olivia must be told of this at once,' said the latter. 'I will undertake that duty. Send off immediately for a doctor, and secure all these letters and papers without loss of time.'

So we lifted him up and carried him away, and laid

him down gently and tenderly on his own bed. Afterwards we returned and fastened up the chamber of death.

Then I felt for the first time that the blow had fallen. I was half stupefied, stunned, as it were, and numbed, before; but I knew it now. I knew that I should never, never see him again.

The blinding tears did my old eyes good—the blinding tears that came so fast as I thought of his cruel fate. The bright, the brave, the beautiful. Was this the end of all? My boy!—my boy!

CHAPTER XLVII.

DUST TO DUST.

IT is needless to dwell on the painful details that succeeded the catastrophe of Gilbert's fate. The necessary precautions, the cruel inquiries, the frightful suspicion, the solemn hush that pervaded the house, the dreary efforts to talk of other matters with the family, the bursts of feeling that would not be controlled. His mother scarcely appeared to realize the fact of her bereavement, yet now that she had lost him, the maternal tenderness of which we all thought her incapable seemed suddenly to have sprung into life. The very servants remarked that Lady Olivia would not allow the merest trifle to be moved from the place where her son had put it. She would sit for hours looking at the chair he used to occupy. With her own hands and a stern silence she moved a portrait of him taken as a boy from the library to her bed-room. The horses he rode were to remain in the stable; the dogs he shot over never to be sold or given away; a small pencil-case that he had left between the leaves of a book on the drawing-room table was privately seized by his mother and hoarded away. Long afterwards I saw it in her workbox. She observed the direction of my eyes, and immediately shut down

the lid. Who knows how that proud impassable woman may have suffered? Who can guess the regrets and vain longings that tore her heart when it was too late? I believe his image was oftener present to her now as the blooming child than the grown man. And she had not even pressed his hand to wish him a last 'Good bye!'

As for Gertrude, she was inconsolable. Her own late-won happiness but made her seem the more sensitive to this overwhelming sorrow. True to his memory in her sisterly affection, she would only rouse herself to defend it from all and every imputation. She could love even John Gordon the better for his loyalty to the dead. That resolute and clear-sighted nature was of infinite use to us in our troubles. Poor Holyhead was so prostrated and unmanned that he was incapable of offering assistance or advice. In his warm, impulsive heart, so little affected by the conventional usages of society, he had loved Gilbert with more than a brother's love, he mourned him with the abandonment of more than a brother's sorrow. John, with his calm exterior and his unruffled presence of mind, was our mainstay and our sheet-anchor; but even he gave way at last. When they moved the coffin gravely and carefully from the death-chamber, John Gordon turned his face to the wall, and wept—that strong, unimpressionable man wept like a little child.

I have Gilbert's watch in my possession now. I have never wound it up, and the hands still point to half-past nine. At that hour it seems to have fallen on the floor, and so stopped. It may have been swept from the table by the last movement that convulsed the body,

ere the soul quitted it. I know not. I have pondered on it long and earnestly. I cannot but think he died at half-past nine.

By degrees we acquired courage to face the necessary ordeal; by degrees we elicited certain facts from which to form our own conclusions. Gilbert had been in the habit of taking laudanum in large quantities. His constitution was already much impaired by this injurious practice, the only respite, as he was once heard to say, from 'the worm that dieth not.' On the evening in question, he had found his letters which arrived by the afternoon post, according to custom, on his writing-table. The groom of the chambers, who had gone to his master's room and brought us the message 'not to wait dinner,' had been refused admittance, but stated that he could not help observing Mr. Orme's voice was very much altered when he spoke to him through the door, and even that discreet official remembered to have hazarded a suggestion to a fellow-servant, that 'his master must either have got some bad news, or been taken suddenly ill.' His orders not to be disturbed were so peremptory that nobody had ventured near him, save Gertrude with the tea. As he did not answer *her*, she concluded he had passed into his other apartment to dress, and would join them later in the drawing-room, or that he was tired and gone to bed. Poor Gertrude! ever since she has reproached herself that she did not force an entrance; and yet, what good could she have done? Nobody knows exactly at what hour he fell into his death-sleep, nor when he woke from it on the other side of the narrow boundary. A phial marked 'Laudanum' stood

in its accustomed place, about half full. His servants were accustomed to see it there, and did not think of watching the diminution of its contents. The cautious physician, who arrived too late, gave it as his opinion, that 'enough of the narcotic had been taken to produce death ten times over in a frame unaccustomed to its use; but that the same quantity was not necessarily fatal under peculiar circumstances, and in a case like the present where the deceased was confirmed in the habit of resorting to this pernicious anodyne.' There could be no doubt that something had distressed and wounded him beyond endurance. That his spirit, harassed and tortured for so long, had completely given way, and he had flown for relief to that fatal remedy in which alone he could hope to find oblivion and repose. There was no question that he had died from the effects of laudanum. He was in the habit of taking it, and we resolved that inadvertently he must have taken too much.

Those who had the right, went through the melancholy duty of examining his papers. He left no will, and his affairs were much involved; frightful inroads on the fine hereditary property of the Ormes having been made during the last year; but of this we took little heed. It is a sad and painful duty to inspect all the little items and minutiæ that bring before us so forcibly the *reality* of our loss, that seem as it were imbued with the very presence of the dead. To select one from among the little trinkets we know so well—the ring we remember to have seen on his finger; the book he loved and quoted; the knife he habitually used—to go over the trifling articles of his toilet, the little

every-day accessories of life, the well-known clothes he wore; to peruse in routine the business letters of which he has kept copies; to weep over the familiar signature, and wonder at the so recent date. All these duties must necessarily wring the hearts of the survivors; and yet in their weary routine and the unavoidable exertion they entail, do they mercifully and gradually inure us to his loss. Ah! had we nothing to do but to sit down with our hands before us, and *think*, there are some sorrows that the heart of man could not confront. There are some partings that, if we had leisure to dwell upon them, would turn our very brain. After the first stunning sensation of the blow, comes the agony of pain, from which we sink into a hopeless lethargy. Were we not roused by the spur of necessity, we should soon follow the beloved one across the dark river, before our time.

One letter lay open beneath his arm, as he stooped over the table against which he died. It was given me to read by those whose delicacy of feeling forbade them to examine more than the signature, and who did not hesitate thus far to confide in my honour and discretion. It had been awaiting him on his return from shooting, and was posted the day before in the quiet country town selected for her retreat by Ada Latimer. It was no long epistle, and yet she seemed to have lingered over its conclusion with a sad wistful foreboding of evil, and a natural repugnance to divide with her own hand the last link of all. It breathed, nevertheless, a tone of humble resignation throughout; and although something of feminine restraint prevented the open avowal of her feelings, it was evident that the

writer had nothing more to look forward to in this world, and trusted but in the one fond hope of meeting him where there would be neither sin nor sorrow in the next. She expressed firmly enough her determination to leave England forthwith, and to seek out her husband beyond seas, although she was well aware of his disinclination to receive her. 'The path of duty,' she said, 'she had resolved to follow undeviatingly for the remainder of the short journey. And now,' she added, 'we shall never meet again on this side the grave. We shall not even hear of each other. We must ignore the whole of the past. We must even forget that we were ever more than friends. Therefore I am not ashamed to confess that I loved you once very dearly; that in those days I would have followed you barefoot to the end of the world; that I would have lived with you and died with you the happiest woman on earth. All that is over now. I depart immediately; and believe me I take this step of my own free choice. The only kindness you can do me now is to forget me. I *wish* you to do so. I *pray* night and morning that you will. Farewell.'

Generous, pure-hearted Ada! I cannot but fear he was incapable of appreciating your noble self-devotion. I cannot but think he would sorely misinterpret the conclusion of your touching letter. He had expressed to me that very day the bitterness with which he reflected on what he was pleased to term your desertion of him. His heart leapt with renewed hope and joy when I told him of your visit to his sick bed. Who shall guess at the revulsion of feeling produced by your farewell? There are some matters that will never be

cleared up till we have all learned the grand secret—some simple facts that we shall never know till we know the simplest and commonest of all. Perhaps the fiercest struggles, the noblest instances of fortitude, the boldest acts of courage on record, have been far surpassed by those which none have been present to witness, and over which death hath drawn an impenetrable veil. We cannot tell. In our ignorance of causes, we can but judge blindly and erringly of effects.

Alas for Gilbert! All I know is that the letter lay open beneath his body, and the bottle of laudanum stood half emptied on the shelf.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE CHIEF MOURNER.

IT was midwinter, and the snow fell heavily—such a winter as people call old-fashioned, which means many uninterrupted weeks of gloomy skies, and landscapes wrapped in white. I was still at West-Acres. There was so much to be looked into, and so many arrangements to make which could only devolve upon the late possessor's oldest friends, that I found my presence indispensable, and could not abandon my post. It is strange, perhaps a little melancholy, to observe how soon matters relapse into their ordinary routine, even after the most painful bereavement. Though the tree that has been felled may be one of the finest and largest in the forest, may have left a gap that it seems at first sight can never be filled up, it is wonderful how soon the grass and weeds begin to spread over the vacant space, and the neighbouring branches to approach, till they interlace at last across the narrowing void, so that on our return we scarcely miss the giant that has been laid low, or perhaps decide that a loss so easily repaired is rather a gain than the reverse.

Household cares, household comforts, household duties went on, just as if the master were not sleeping beneath

the snow. Lady Olivia, dark and stern, more silent, more imperious, more exacting than ever, alluded neither by word nor gesture to her loss. Lady Gertrude, though she would weep bitterly at times if anything reminded her unexpectedly of her cousin, had yet a thousand occupations and distractions in the details of her approaching marriage, impending though postponed. John Gordon was in London, indeed she wrote to him every day; and Holyhead in Yorkshire preparing for the reception of his future Viscountess, and to her intense gratification corresponding with the same diurnal regularity. These two good fellows had lost their dearest and oldest comrade. No friends could have been more faithful—no mourners more sincere—but what can you expect? They had other ties, other hopes, other interests; for *them* all that made life worth having did not go down to the grave with Gilbert. So they set their houses in order for their coming brides, and bespoke plate and linen, and purchased appropriate ornaments, and bustled about like the rest of us, as if they were to live for ever, thinking of 'poor Gilbert,' perhaps three or four times a week, perhaps not so often.

I believe the old retriever and myself were the two beings that missed him most of all.

Between nine and ten one night I was returning to the Hall from a visit to a sick person in the neighbouring village. The poor fellow was an old acquaintance who had worked for many years about the place and grounds. I had been reading him a chapter in the Bible, and the dying man was much comforted and impressed with its holy truths. 'He was ready to go,' he said, 'now his day's work was done,' and seemed to

please himself with the illustration of the labourer in the vineyard, and to look forward with a certain sense of reality to receiving his wages from his lord. The very last words he spoke to me were these, 'I am too weak to thank you for your kindness now. I shall meet you again and thank you in heaven!'

I was in a more serious mood than common as I left the cottage, and I resolved to pass by the churchyard, as I had done several times already, and spend a few minutes by the side of Gilbert's grave. A low square tomb with a plain inscription had been lately put up over the spot where he slept. I felt I should like to stand by it awhile, and think of my boy. The dead seem nearer to us when we are in the very place where we saw them laid, and poor humanity draws some strange futile consolation from the idea, as though if it were possible for us to see them again on earth, they would be more likely to meet us here than elsewhere. Vain as may be the longing, I believe we are none of us without it, and yet when was it ever gratified? I often think one of the greatest and holiest mysteries in this mysterious lot of ours, is the persuasion that we feel, contrary to our senses and our experience, of some hidden link between ourselves and those who have gone before us to the shadowy land. We weep for them, refusing to be comforted, we mourn them, aye, mourn as those without hope, and yet something tells us that we shall not always be thus fettered and powerless, that a time will come when we shall burst the material trammels that now clog and madden us; that the spirit shall predominate at last in its immortality, and if the universe holds them, we shall meet our beloved again.

There had been heavy snow during the day, and more was still falling. The ground was covered a foot deep, so it was as light as noon; the old church stood boldly out against a white background, and every hedge and plantation that intersected the hill behind it was traced as distinctly as the line of a pencil-drawing on a sheet of paper. I could see where the home meadows ended and Farmer Giles's close began. I could even distinguish the open gateway into the 'forty-acres,' and far beyond that the long straggling ash wood, and the black bank of gorse that constituted the fox-covert. Poor Gilbert! it was a favourite spot of his, enclosed and cherished under his immediate eye. He would never see it drawn again.

I passed through the wicket into the churchyard. As I turned an angle of the building and came suddenly in sight of his grave, I was startled to observe *something black*, that seemed to be thrown, as it were, across the tomb. For an instant I thought of the dog's fidelity and the old retriever, the next, I saw it was a woman's figure, and I knew it could only be Ada Latimer.

She was stretched upon her face across the broad square surface of the stone. Her bonnet and cloak had come off unheeded. Her brown hair swept in heavy masses over her neck and arms. She did not writhe, nor sob, nor wail, but lay there under the heavy sky and the falling snow, prostrate and motionless, like the dead.

A horrid fear came over me, but I shook it off, and went to her with noiseless steps, and took her hand, and spoke to her by name.

Then she rose, slowly, deliberately, neither startled nor surprised, and turned upon me her seeking eyes, that seemed indeed prepared to meet some other face than mine.

That eager, sorrowing gaze remained unchanged for a few seconds—then the wistful eyes grew dim, the pale lips writhed, the wan set features contracted with a sudden spasm. She was back in the lonely world again. She sank once more upon her knees, laid her forehead against the cold, wet stone, and wept without restraint.

After a while she grew calmer, and suffered me to raise her, and wrap her in her cloak, for she was shivering with cold. Her sobs, too, subsided, for she had more self-command than most *men;* and she took my hand in both of hers, and spoke to me for the first time.

'I could not go away without coming here,' she said. 'Do you think it was so *very* wrong? May God have mercy on me! Have I not been punished enough?'

I had not heard her voice for many months. I should not have recognised it for hers, so changed was it, and hoarse, and broken now.

I soothed and consoled her as best I could. I scarcely know what I said. How can the tongue of man comfort such grief as hers? Soon she made an effort to summon all her strength, and though she still shook with cold, her voice was steadier as she resumed.

'I only saw it in the newspapers—the horrid, horrid suspicions—the dreadful inquiry. I cannot suffer more than I have done. Do not be afraid to tell me *everything*. I can bear the worst now!'

It seemed best to give way to her. Surely she had

a *right* to know. I related all the painful story nearly as I have related it to you. I told her of my walk home with *him*. I was indeed the last person who had seen him alive. I described our sad conversation, and the morbid state of feeling to which he had brought himself. I did not even conceal his great troubled joy when he learned that she had visited his sick-bed, nay, I had not the cruelty to withhold from her the last words I heard him speak as he rushed to his chamber to be alone—'Oh, God! she loves me still.'

A light as of some intense happiness glowed in her face for an instant, though it darkened immediately with a deeper sorrow, and she bowed her head and wept bitterly again. So have I seen on a drenching, cheerless day in March the sun shine out for a space with more than summer splendour, ere the black clouds sweep once more across the sky, to break in gusts and storms and pelting pitiless rain.

Of course I was wrong. Of course I ought not to have spoken a word of kindness or sympathy or comfort, but to have stood by and looked on in pious reprobation, pointing to the grave of the dead sinner, and insisting on his fate as a warning, yet more to crush the living loving heart that was left. I cannot justify myself. I confess my error. I do not defend it. I was weak, I was foolish, I was sinful; still I could not have done otherwise. God help me! Even at three score years and ten a man's heart is something less hard than the nether millstone. No, I do not regret it. She listened so much more calmly after that. I told her how I had found him. She spared me no details. 'Where was he sitting?—what was he doing?—how was he dressed?—

was he writing?—had he got her letter?—was he in the habit of taking that dreadful laudanum? It was so easy to pour out a little too much! and he was always so heedless about trifles! Perhaps he took it directly he came in, and before he read his letters? Did I not know? Had I not been able to find out? All these questions hurried out eagerly and breathlessly, while she hung upon the answers as if her life depended on my words. I endeavoured to reassure her as much as possible. Without departing from the truth, I tried to make it clear to her that she could have had nothing to do with the over-excitement which had driven him to the fatal remedy; that her letter, which I had seen, was calculated to soothe rather than madden him; that it was, in short, one of those Judgments of which, as we could never know its exact details, we were bound to accept the least shocking probability. In vain. She always came round to the same ghastly doubt, the same harassing inquiry, *had he done it before or after he read her letter?*

I changed the subject two or three times, inquiring her present prospects and future movements. I learned she had come to stay a few days in a little town five or six miles off, that she was resolved to depart from England forthwith, but that she could not leave without visiting the grave of him who had loved her so dearly, with whom she had once hoped to spend a long and happy life. She had been here last night and the night before. She had a carriage even now waiting for her in the village. She must go away to-morrow, and perhaps she should never have even this melancholy consolation again.

I entreated her to take shelter at the Hall or elsewhere. I urged upon her that she was killing herself, that the cold and exposure was more than any woman's frame could bear. I even begged of her to order her carriage and return. No, 'she would not stir from that spot,' she said, 'till her doubts were satisfied, till she knew whether *she* had killed him, murdered him, her own—her love—her darling, for whom she would have died to shield him from the slightest harm.'

She was getting wild, incoherent, at last. I feared for her brain. I knew not what to do, I was at my wit's end.

Suddenly a new thought seemed to strike her. She griped my arm fiercely, and her eyes, usually so soft and kind, glared into mine as she asked, in a hoarse, thick whisper—

'What time did he die?'

I told her I had myself picked his watch up from the floor, and it had stopped at half-past nine.

The whole face softened into more than earthly beauty, breaking into such a smile as it would have made you weep to see.

'Half-past nine!' she repeated, and for the first time that night, the voice was Ada's own.

'Half-past nine! My love—my love; I *knew* you could never leave me without coming to say Good bye!'

CHAPTER XLIX.

TOO LATE.

TWO years had past and gone since I had seen Ada Latimer weeping over the grave of Gilbert Orme—since I had placed her, half stupified with grief, in the carriage that bore her away from the spot where her heart lay buried with my boy. Two years, with all their changes in the outward world, and their addition to the load we carry, each of us in our inner life! The weights truly are heavier, and the strength decreases, but the feeble shortening steps bear us nearer and nearer to the goal. For two years I had not seen nor heard of her, yet was she seldom absent from my thoughts. Sleeping and waking, the sad inquiring face seemed to haunt me still. I was again in London, in the vast city on which time seems to make no impression, and but that a few of the *items* which constitute its whole had passed away, it was little changed, even to me, from the London of ten, aye, twenty years ago. The new faces in the club windows wore the weary expression of the old ones; the new voices seemed to be as languid and listless as those others silent now for evermore. Orme, indeed, was forgotten. Charley Wing never came to St. James's-street, and Landless had succeeded to the only terri-

torial reversion, he had been unable to make over to the Jews,—the six feet by three to which the humblest of us is an heir of entail; but Flippant was alive still, alive and merry, with a deeper colour than ever, and a darker wig and a brighter smile, the envy of his cotemporaries, alternately the butt and the oracle of younger men who were following in his steps. With Flippant, however, and his school I have nothing to do. I am more interested in the prosperity of those whom I connect with my last visit at West-Acres, and on their happiness it is my chief pleasure to dwell.

I have seldom been splashed by the wheels of a sociable with such satisfaction to myself as I was near the corner of Bruton-street, whilst waiting to cross that thoroughfare not very long ago. Looking up, I saw on the panel of the carriage a double cipher, in which the letter G was twisted and tortured and multiplied into itself with extraordinary ingenuity, and raising my eyes a few feet farther they rested upon Lady Gertrude's handsome face beaming with matronly beauty and content, also on a tiny copy of the same with a huge cockade and a strong dash of John Gordon's resolution about its infant brows. She stopped to show me the son and heir with more than a mother's pride. How she believes in 'baby' nobody but the young mother of a first-born can conceive. It is a fine child doubtless and a vigorous. Indeed, the poor canary has already fallen a victim to its energetic caresses.

Like its father's, the baby's grasp is not only strong but tenacious, and too ardent an embrace of the yellow throat left the poor favourite dead on the floor of its cage. Gertrude has read how the sucking Hercules

strangled the serpents in his cradle, and is immensely proud of the feat. For the rest, she is thoroughly happy, cannot be brought to a skirmish now, even with Lady Olivia, and thinks there is but one man on earth, and that man is John Gordon. Also they are going to spend the autumn with the Holyheads at their place in Yorkshire. Of the latter couple I have heard a good deal through Mrs. Montpellier. Although she vows she has scarcely forgiven the peer for not giving her the option of refusing him, she expresses herself perfectly satisfied with his choice, and showed much kindness to Bella when mourning the death of her father, an event which postponed her marriage for nearly a twelvemonth. The old Alderman has played his last rubber, and died happily enough in the arms of his dear child. Mrs. Montpellier prospers as she deserves; she has quite overcome the Visigoth faction, and goes to lunch with the inmates of Ormolu-house, as if she had known them from childhood. She and Lady Ormolu have become hand-and-glove about homœopathy, so that Lady Visigoth, though by no means silenced, has been compelled to submit. True to the nature of her kind, she is less rancorous in defeat than victory. Mrs. Montpellier's black eyes sparkle mischievously when they meet. One would hardly think they could ever fill with tears, as they did when she talked to me about poor Gilbert the last time we were together. It is more than a year ago, and she has doubtless forgotten him; there have been moments when I thought in bitterness they have *all* forgotten him now. Even the old retriever howls no longer at the gun-room door; though he persisted for months in that offensive habit, he has left it off at last.

'Yes,' I said to myself in Bruton-street, as Lady Gertrude drove away with her baby in her arms and a merry laugh on her face; 'it's the way of the world—the rolling, changing world. I believe I am the only mourner left!'

My heart was heavy as I went to evening church, according to my favourite custom, in a locality where such services are performed on stated week-days. Though my eyes are dim now, and I am deaf and stupid, and the clergyman's voice is but an indistinct, monotonous drone in my ears, I love the dark recesses, and the scattered lights, and the sacred gloom of the place of worship. Above all, I love to mark the triumphant swell of the pealing organ, and the high notes of the choristers, soaring like an echo of angels' voices from the distance of Eternity, and the hallowed music that I may humbly hope to hear in another world.

As I listened to the chanting of the evening psalms, I was aware of a voice of peculiar sweetness that joined in the holy melody—a voice that I fancied I had heard before, that seemed to touch some thrilling chord and wake some painful memory in the depths of my heart, but yet that, strange to say, I did not recognise. Again and again it rose and fell in the beautiful poetry of the inspired minstrel, till in a verse of touching sorrow, too sacred for me to mention here, it seemed to be cut short with a stifled sob, and I heard it no more during the rest of the service.

Though I never imagined she was in England, I was scarcely surprised when Ada Latimer put her arm within mine at the church-door, and adapting her steps

to my slow and feeble gait, walked silently and sadly with me up the lamplit street.

There was something in her face that forbade me to accost her with commonplace words of greeting and inquiry. It was pale as marble, and the contrast with her black dress in the gaslight was unearthly. Could this be the Ada who was once the very Rose of Womanhood? the pride and flower of her sex?

After a few steps she spoke. The sweet low voice had lost none of its music, but there was that in its tone which told of a broken heart.

'I saw you in church,' she said; 'I waited to speak to you. I have no one to consult; no one to guide or to advise me *now*.'

I bade her talk to me as she would to a father.

'I have tried to do right,' she said. 'Do you think I am justified in remaining in England? I have been to Australia to seek my husband. I can hear nothing of him. There is no trace by which I can follow him. I remained at Sydney till my money was nearly exhausted. I can at least get my bread in London, and it is a long, long way from—from where you met me last. Surely there is no harm in my staying here. Indeed I have but one wish, to labour whilst I live, and do all the good that one weak woman can. Night and morning I pray but to know what is required of me. Oh! I want to be so good, *so good*. It may be'—and her voice sank to a whisper, whilst a shudder swept over her frame—'it may be that his blood is on my head. Shall I have to seek him through all eternity without finding him? Oh! no, no. I believe the scriptures, and they promise

me that "the fervent prayer of the righteous availeth much!"'

Trusting even beyond the grave. Hoping when even hope itself had failed. Ah! could he but have thought as you did, Ada, my boy had been still alive. You would never have met on earth, but Infinite Mercy would have tempered your afflictions here, and to Infinite Mercy you would cheerfully have confided your lot hereafter. Alas for the one who failed at the moment of trial, in his faith! Alas for the proud self-confidence, the reckless spirit, and undisciplined heart! I *dare* not speculate on its doom, nor argue on the award of unimpeachable justice; nor place a limit to the ransom which has rescued millions on millions of souls for all eternity.

Could I tell Ada Latimer she must leave that hope alone for ever?

THE END.

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